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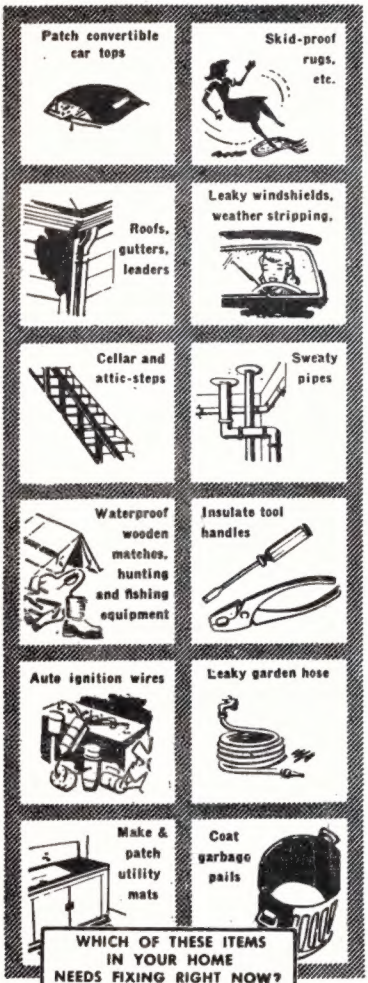

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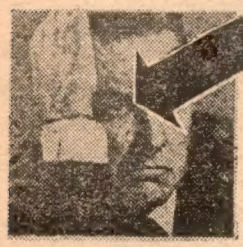

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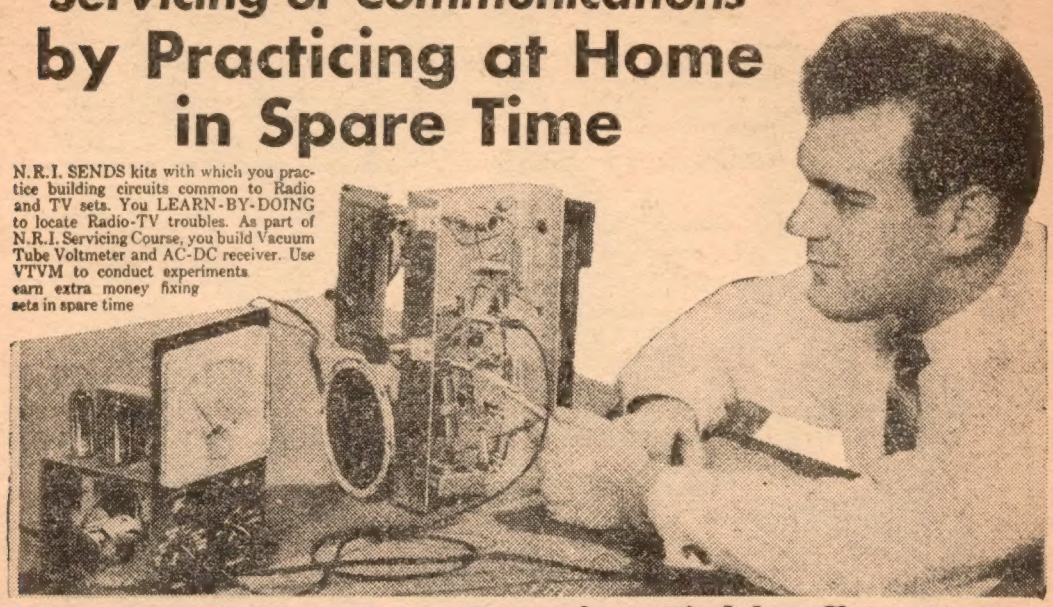

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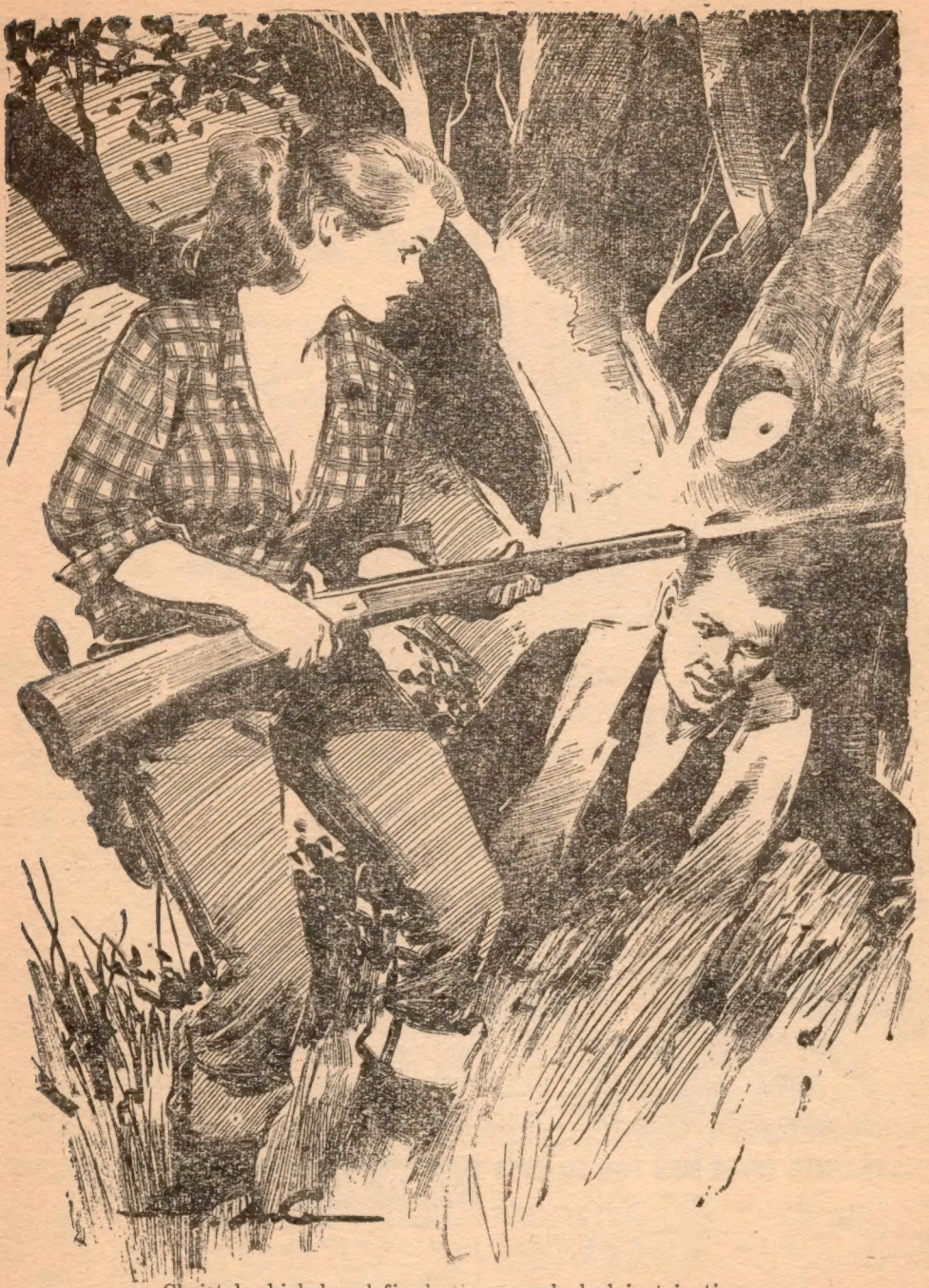


Christel whirled and fired; the man ducked just in time.

SPITFIRE AND GLORY GUNS

Christel had seen the stranger who rode up to where Doff Curry was branding, and shot him in the back; but no one had seen him since. And when Deputy Gerredge finally found a trail, Chris had her rifle ready for vengeance!

Featured Novel of Hired Homicide

by LAURAN PAINE

THE BARTENDER wagged his head wryly and let the disillusioned glance of his blank eyes wander over the lean man at the far end of the bar. His soft words barely carried beyond the deputy's ears. "Glory guns, I call 'em. Always huntin' for a victim to blast that'll add to the fame of the men that wears 'em." He nodded again, emphatically. "Glory guns."

The deputy didn't answer. His own glance was steady on the only other patron of the *Double Dollar Saloon*. The freshness of early morning mingled with the stale odors of the old room. Rarely did men drink before breakfast, but the two-gun man was downing straight whiskey. The deputy's teeth were on edge from watching the man sip the liquor. Only a real drinking man could do that, and a real drinking man would eventually corrode his nerves. The deputy pictured the end, too, for the man with the hired guns. An end brought on by the same whiskey that he craved now, but would crave worse as the years went by.

The drinker was lean, hard as whipcord, thin-lipped and cold-eyed. He was flat-muscled too, with the physical vigor of a man bred to the hardship of the frontier—but one sensed an aura of hate and venom around him. Again the deputy philosophised. The gunman was resentful of the troubles of some and the ease of others. He had the brooding features of a vindictive man. If one coupled this with good coordination and hunger for renown, one generally had the basic reasons behind a killer. He shrugged and turned away from the bar with a hint of contempt in his deep, grey eyes.

"See ya later, Josh."

The bartender nodded indifferently without looking up.

As Deputy Gerredge walked out

through the louvred doors into the thin warmth of the new day beyond the shadowy barroom, Billings moved toward his only patron automatically. The man's cold contemptuous eyes flickered over his impassive face, approved of the tight lips and blank eyes. He pushed the tiny glass forward with one rigid finger. "You don't look like a man full o' information, bartender."

Joshua Billings looked up fleetingly as he refilled the glass from an unmarked bottle under the counter. "I'm not," he said, flatly.

The gunman laughed softly. "A man lives longer that way, don't he?" Billings set the little glass down in its former pool of stickiness and started to move away without answering when the drinker spoke again, as softly as he had laughed. "Stick around, bartender; I want some directions." Billings turned back, eyes smouldering slightly. The gunman nodded approvingly. "How do I find a place called the Quartered Circle?"

Billings sighed inwardly. That was easy; what he had expected was questions about some individual. He had seen it happen before. A stranger rides into a town and asks about a man; then the man dies suddenly, and the stranger isn't around any more.

"Did you ride into Lowell from the North?"

"Yeah."

"Well, about a mile back, on the road you come into town on, there's a weathered old sign that says, *Quartered Circle, one mile.*" He nodded his head once, brusquely. "Foller it over the range an' you'll come to the house. It's set in a sort o' swale with a lot of junipers and cottonwoods around it."

The gunman nodded absently, gauging Billings. "Thanks," he said, in his soft, thoughtful way. The silver dollar rang unusually loud on the bar top as he turned away. Billings scooped it up and dropped it automatically into the steel box, then he watched the lean hips, encased in their mahogany-colored gunbelt, undulate toward the door. The man's hard eyes and thin mouth were a giveaway. Cowboys were usually nothing more than boys grown into a man's estate; this man was a killer. It stood out all over him.

HE MOPPED the bar top automatically with a damp, sour-smelling rag and his thoughts ran back to dupty, Phil Gerredge. The county was poor and sprawled out. Old Sheriff Calkins, over at Tipton, the county seat, could only afford one deputy for each cowtown; and even then, only if they were shipping points with enough trouble to warrant the expense. Otherwise, they got a local town marshal.

Phil Gerredge was a good boy; he wasn't a trouble-hunter. In fact, he looked the other way most of the time, unless trouble was real and bitter; then he stepped in with more courage, perhaps, than sense.

Josh thought back down the years to the first time he had known the Gerredges, and came as close to a smile as he ever did. He had been passing a hardscrabble ranch on his way into Lowell, one biting Fall morning, when he heard a regular tirade coming from the wood shed. He had ridden over and seen young Phil getting a hiding from his late father. Phil had grown into a good, clean, honest lad, but Josh doubted that he was any great shakes as a gunhand.

The Quartered Circle was an old ranch, one of the oldest in Grant County. The house was aged with a sort of hoary gentleness that gave it grace for good living. The stranger swung down before the low veranda just as the sun was eclipsed by a far jagged stone spire on the horizon. He

stood by his horse with a cool patience, knowing that his approach had probably been seen by those within. Before long, the front door opened and a tall girl, full-breasted and with the bloom of life in her face, looked at him. He doffed his hat mechanically and a look that passed as a smile, except for the eyes, slid onto his face. "Doff Curry aroun'?"

She had made her appraisal and nodded. "I believe he's down at the corrals. They're branding, down there."

He listened, then turned wordlessly, still wearing the vacant smile, and slid back into the saddle. She watched him rein around and walked his horse toward the corrals. The way there was marked by insistent cows lowing to frantic youngsters. She watched his back with a small frown. His trade was written all over him. Well, Doff wasn't in the habit of keeping company with gunmen, so perhaps it could be overlooked this once.

She was half across the cool living room, intent on checking the roast in the oven, when she heard the shot. Flat, half muffled by the distance and the barn, but unmistakable. She stopped dead still and listened. Fear and a cold sense of premonition knifed into her heart. She could plainly hear the running horse, then, like a distant rolling of drums. She was heading back toward the front door when a man came running toward the house. It was Elizah Given, her brother. "Liz" to everyone in Grant County.

"Chris! Christel!"

She ran to meet him. The sound of her name was heavy with horror in her brother's voice. "Christel!"

"Yes, Liz. What is it?"

LIZ STOPPED short at sight of her. They stood not ten feet apart on the vine-cooled veranda and exchanged stares. She read it in the stupified amazement in Liz's eyes. "Doff?" He nodded and relaxed a little. His eyes slid off her face and he plumped down into a rawhide bottomed chair.

"Some son of—"

"Was it a tallish, pale-eyed man with two guns—on a breedy-looking bay horse?"

"Yes. Gawd! He jus' rode up where Doff an' I was workin' on a bull calf. Emmet and Slim were stretchin' the critter from horseback. Doff had his back to the stranger; he was doin' the cuttin'. The louse jus' rode up, sat lookin' at us fer a minute, then whipped out a gun and shot Doff straight between the shoulderblades. Doff never even seen him ride up. I seen him, an' so did Emmet and Slim." Liz wiped the congealed sweat from his ashen face. "Doff fell across the damned calf, an' the stranger whirled his big bay an' run like the devil was behind him."

Christel looked pityingly at her brother. She doubted if he had ever seen a man killed before. He was gentle, almost to the point of being too soft; she had seen him angry, but never in a rage. She watched the whiteness spread out from around the shocked look in his eyes.

"Liz?"

"Yes?"

"Did Slim and Emmet take Doff into the bunkhouse?"

"I reckon. They was lookin' at him when I run up here."

" 'Ran up here', Liz, not 'run up here'."

His head came around and a little color came back into it. "Chris, dammit all, do you realize that Doff's been killed? Are you going to correct my English even when—"

His voice was rising, so she cut in with her calm, level tones. "No, dear. Only I think you'd better send one of the boys for the sheriff, don't you?"

He looked at her for a long mo-

ment and said nothing. Chris was his sister. More than that; she'd been his father and mother, too. They were both orphans—but he was only eighteen, while Christel was twenty-five. He got up and pulled his hat low over his eyes again. "Yeah. Awright. Sure; I'll get the deputy from Lowell, but I don't see as that'll help Doff much. He's dead."

"But his death must be avenged, Liz. The law will have to get his killer."

He nodded gently, more color in his face now, so that it looked almost natural again. "I reckon," he said, absently, as he turned away and started for the barn where the saddle horses were kept.

-2-

BY THE TIME Phil Gerredge had ridden back from Lowell with Liz Givens, Doff Curry's remains were stiffening. The deputy looked just once at the body, long enough to identify it and the means of death, then he went over to the main house and eased down into a chair beside Christel. For a long time he didn't say anything. Just let the cool peacefulness of this old ranch and its fragrance seep through his pores.

Christel broke the silence. "Why did he do it?"

Gerredge shook his head easily and answered reluctantly, without looking at her. "Haven't the faintest idea. I know the killer, though."

"Then arrest him."

Gerredge turned thoughtful eyes on Chris. She wasn't a big sister to him—just a very pretty girl he had known since childhood; her parents had been killed accidentally by a bunch of drunken Mexican revolutionists three years before.

"Well, I don't mean I know his name; but from Liz's description, I know who he is, because I saw him in the *Double Dollar* this morning." He kept on looking at her, even when he had nothing further to say.

"Well?"

Phil Gerredge looked away. "Well," he mocked back at her. "Tell me why anyone would shoot ol' Doff?" He didn't give her a chance to speak. "He's been on this here ranch for at least ten years. Ten years that I know of. He wasn't a drinker, or a fighter, so why in hell would someone shoot him? I mean, just ride into the yard, ask where he was, then ride down to the corrals an' kill him before three witnesses. Why?"

Chris was frowning in concentration when she swung her head and looked at Gerredge's profile. Her mouth was open to speak, too, but she didn't say anything. Not right away, anyway. She saw Phil's head coming around with a perplexed look on it and hastened to say something to hide her confusion.

"I can't imagine. I've known Doff since I was a little girl. He was sort of an uncle to me. As you said, he very rarely went to town, and avoided the things that cowboys usually like. In fact, Dad used to say Doff acted like a kicked puppy. Somewhat unhappy and brooding, but keeping it all to himself."

PHIL SAT back and watched the coroner's buggy wheel into the yard with a small shower of dust devils following the wheels. He didn't say anything until after Doff's body had been carted out, shrouded in a clean blanket, and loaded. Then he waved at Oliver Perry, who returned

the salute and walked importantly toward the veranda. "Aft'noon, Oliver."

"Aft'noon, Phil." Off came the new Stetson with a fat-handed flourish, "Aft'noon, Miss Christel."

Chris motioned toward a chair and smiled. "Good afternoon, Mister Perry."

The coroner shook his head at the chair. "No, ma'am; I gotta get back. Thanks all the same." He looked speculatively at the relaxed deputy. "You got any ideas, Phil?" Gerredge's slow-moving eyes fixed themselves on Perry and he said nothing. Perry understood and forced a little, brittle laugh. "No offense, Phil. Just wondered is all."

"Yeah. I'm sure you did. No, I've gotten nowhere, but if I do turn up anything, I'll see that you get a report."

"Of course. Of course. Well, the heat's hard on bodies. I'd better get back."

"Yeah." Phil said wryly. "Good idea."

They watched the coroner's buggy whirl out of the yard and down the lane toward the wagon road back to Lowell.

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Oh, it's nothing personal, Chris. It's just that he's so damned—"

"Darned."

"Uh—yeah; so darned crude. Like that comment about the heat an' bodies."

"Yes," she said; "I understand what you mean."

Phil got up and looked down at her. "Chris?"

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing. Some other time, maybe." He smiled self-consciously and touched his gracefully up-curving Stetson. She looked a little puzzled when he nodded, and watched his whipcord figure stalk across the yard to where Liz and Slim were sitting in slumped silence in the shade of the barn, where his horse was tied.

Slim looked up at the deputy. His very prominent Adam's Apple bobbled a couple of times before he spoke. "Phil, it just don't plain make sense to me."

"No," Phil said, as he untied the reins and swung aboard, "nor to me either, Slim." His eyes flicked over to Liz, read the stunned horror on the boy's face and puckered a little. A feeling a little like a big brother swept through him. "Liz, do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure. What?"

"Go through Doff's stuff an' bring me any letters you find, or anything that might give me a little help in figurin' this thing, will you?"

Liz nodded uncomfortably. "Yeah. Me an' Slim'll do it this evenin'."

Gerredge's face went back to the corrals where the calves were trying to get to their mothers through the pole partitions. "No. Let it go until tomorrow. You better turn out those cattle before they shrink off all their summer gain. It'll soon be dark, anyway."

He saw the two cowboys walking dolefully toward the corrals as he rode slowly down the lane. Death wasn't a stranger to Phil Gerredge, but he felt the same bewildered numbness that young Elizah Given felt.

When the deputy got back to Lowell, it was dark with a sheen of bluish velvet sheathing over the range land and the scuffed, faded little town. Even so, it was still warm, though, as the baked ground sighed and gave off its hot breath under the benediction of the night. He put his horse up at the livery barn and went home. There wasn't anything else to do; besides, he wanted to think a little.

CHRISTEL sent Liz to Lowell twice in the ten days following

Doff's murder. She wanted to know exactly what had been done toward apprehending the killer. Each time Gerredge sent back the same answer: Nothing. So, it was with a little feeling of exasperation when he met her on the street outside the tiny office the county begrudgingly leased from the livery barn owner, for him. He touched his hat and held the door open for her. She went inside and stood before his desk. He put his hat on a deerhorn rack and said nothing.

"Phil, I'm a little impatient, maybe, but—"

"Chris, I can only tell you that I'd know the man if I ever saw him again; but sit down, please."

"No." She was piqued by his air of weariness.

"Well then, *I* will." He sat and looked up at her. She was very handsome, even for the first thing in the morning. He squinted a little, and spoke. "There's something you don't understand, Chris. This is a big country and a man just can't lope out and corral every killer that's in it. If ever anything turns up, anything at all, that'll help me find that man, I'll go after him." He spread his broad, chapped hands deprecatingly. "But until I have something definite to go, I'm just plumb lost. Don't you see?"

Christel's very clear eyes with the blue-white background, appraised him closely. *He's a quitter,* she thought; *doesn't take a killing seriously enough to show any determination. I was wrong about him. He's handsome, yes, but lazy, like most goodlooking men—and maybe even corrupt, because he certainly isn't doing anything about Doff's murder.* Outwardly, her face showed only a slight tint of scorn when she spoke.

"All right, Deputy Gerredge. I'll hire men to find Doff's killer. He was like an uncle to Liz and me, and we'll avenge his death, if you won't."

He got up slowly, painfully, with an annoyed frown. "Chris, the law doesn't revenge anything. It exacts payment and keeps order, but it doesn't take revenge. I'm afraid your understanding of the purpose of the law is a little oldfashioned. When the frontier was young—"

"When I want a sermon, Phillip Gerredge, I'll get more qualified men than you to preach it. Maybe the law doesn't believe in revenge, but *I do!*" She spun on her heel and walked out of the little office. He watched her stiff back disappear down the duckboards and didn't move until even the echoes of her feet were lost in other sounds of Lowell's slow, lethargic awakening.

"Dammit to hell, anyway," he exploded. "I'm downright sick of this job." He yanked down his hat and slammed out of the office, heading for the *Double Dollar* Saloon.

It wasn't until he had felt the solace of a cool glass of beer that he thought back to Doff Curry and the ragged, worn old letter Liz had found in Doff's affects and given him. Doff had made one serious mistake in his life, before coming to the Quartered Circle. It wasn't the first time the same mistake had been made, nor was it the first time similar payment of the same mistake had been made, either. An illegitimate child and a wrathy, primitive lust for revenge had taken another life. Even though Doff's error was nineteen years old, still, final payment had been exacted by a hired gun. Phil sipped his beer broodingly. Unfortunately, Doff's old letter—kept probably, because of the dead man's sense of guilt and nostalgia, gave no address no clue of origin. Just the signed name, *Ned*—evidently a brother, or close relation to the "fallen girl", who, by now, must be an older woman. As old, Phil thought, as Doff had been.

"So it was Doff Curry the glory guns were after?"

Phil looked up into Josh's blank eyes. "Yeah. Doff. Old standby of the Quartered Circle." He watched idly as Josh swobbed the bar top with mechanical effort. "I can't rightly remember when I first saw old Doff. It was when I was a kid." He marvelled that Doff's secret had been so well kept.

"Don't make no difference," Josh said with a callous shrug.

"No; I reckon not."

NEWS TRAVELED slowly across the great range, but inevitably all bad news came to the sweltering little cattle shipping town of Lowell. When Archer Littleton was shot in the back in his own dooryard by a hidden assasin, Lowell stirred a little and wagged its head. Old Archer had been a wealthy man. Rumor had it that his start, at the close of the Civil War, wasn't exactly ethical; but still, the passing decades had eliminated most of the oldtimers, so that only rumors remained. And rumors couldn't stand up against the respect the range held for Littleton wealth.

Phil Gerredge remembered another such murder; he rode over to the immensely rich Littleton spread, and ran into Archer's college-bred son, who had hired private sources to find his father's killer. He wasn't prepared for the reception he got. Young Littleton's contempt for lawmen was bitter.

"I appreciate your coming, Mister Gerredge, but the Littleton interests don't need, or desire, local interference in this matter. At all!"

Phil felt his anger rising when he answered. "I'm plumb sorry you feel that way, Mister Littleton, but the law in this County—"

"Law in Grant County!" The younger man exploded. He swore obscenely and his face filled with dark blood. "That's a laugh! We don't want any bungling deputies getting in our way, and we are prepared to see that they don't."

Phil left the Littleton ranch holding himself in. His eyes were puckered and hard, and the flesh of his face was a little whiter where the muscles around his mouth held it taut. He rode on slowly toward Lowell seeing only the hot, arid landscape he had known from birth. Two outraged ranches now; two murders. The thought struck him rather forcibly. Both killings had followed a definite, ruthless pattern. Possibly the same gunman had done both jobs.

He stabled his horse and went to the telegraph office and wired Sheriff Calkins for an aide until he had solved the killings. He was sitting motionless, frowning at the blankness of his office wall, when the answer came back.

"Sorry. No help available. Are you ill?"

"Sonafa..." He balled up the yellow sheet and threw it forcibly into a nearby brass spittoon. No! He wasn't 'ill' and he resented the implication behind the word. All right! Lowell could take care of its own street fights and drunken caterwauling; he was going hunting for a hired gunman and the power behind him. Doff's death had a purpose he understood; but for the life of him he couldn't see anything that might connect the two killings—even if they both had been committed in the same manner. There was a connection all right, though; and by gawd he was going to run it down!

NO ONE WAS more surprised to see Phil Gerredge standing in the flickering light of the kitchen lantern than Christel Given. She stepped aside, silently, and closed the door behind

him. *Well?* Her eyes seemed to say. *Have you decided to act, finally, now that another murder has been committed? Are you getting uneasy, now, about your job?* She motioned toward a chair and he saw that she was alone in the house. He sat and dropped his hat to the floor behind the chair.

"Liz home?"

"No; he and Slim haven't come in yet. They've been moving cattle all day. Taking them to higher ground. The lower feed's just about all dried up."

Phil nodded soberly. He looked at her with an owlish absorption and drank deeply of her perfection before he spoke. "Chris, I'm sorry I got a little huffy the last time you were at the office."

She tossed her head slightly and her eyes darkened a shade. "Have you found anything interesting enough to stir you out of that cool little office, yet?"

He squirmed in the chair but let the sarcasm go by. "Only that Archer Littleton was shot down the same way Doff was."

"Well," came the tart reply—although Chris knew it was neither fair nor logical, even as she said it—"how many men will be shot down in their own yards before the law does something?"

He was coloring under the second barb and she saw it with regret. Knowing she had gone too far, this time, she hastened to forestall anything he might say that would leave her no alternative except to continue sniping at him. "I'm sorry, Phil. I didn't really mean that."

He didn't say anything for a long moment, but the whiteness around his mouth vanished. There was one thing he *would* have liked to say, but he couldn't. There was no opening for it, but he thought it anyway. *Chris; you're beautiful and I'll be damned if I ever noticed it before Doff got killed.*

He shook his head like a bull annoyed by flies and cleared out the irrelevant thoughts, before he spoke. "Chris, tell me something; do you remember much about Archer Littleton, junior? I mean—his old man sent him out of the country for his schooling, and us local boys never did know him. He was too—well—high class for us. But I know he got to know all the local girls. In fact, I distinctly recall him taking you to the last dance over at the Lowell grade school held there, last Fall."

She was watching his face as he spoke. There were tiny crowsfeet around his thoughtful eyes and it pleased her to see that he wasn't a really young man, any more. Too, there was the settled, calm look in his eyes that meant stability.

She shrugged a little as she answered. "No, I'm afraid I can't really tell you much about young Archer. He's a little self-centered. Proud, as a lot of rich men's sons get to be, and possibly arrogant. But his manners are perfect and his education superior to most local educations." She shook her head. "Actually, Phil, Archer is just a typical rich man's son. Impatient, overbearing in a genteel way, contemptuous of less fortunate people and—well—a little ruthless."

His eyes didn't blink as he watched her speak. They were clear and somber. "Was he, I mean—are you two—" his voice trailed off under a furiously self-conscious blush. She understood and answered even as she felt her heart lurch, for the second time, while she was talking with him.

"No. There's nothing between us. In fact, I haven't seen Archer since last Fall when he took me to the dance at Lowell." She got up poured them both thick cups of coffee. "And then

about all we talked about was ranching in Grant County." She set his cup down at the table and he moved his chair up to it. "His father wanted to buy the Quartered Circle, so he'd have open access to the high range."

LIZ FOUND Gerredge shoeing a horse in the back of the livery barn. He squatted in silence and watched as the farrier's knife flicked out dead sole.

"Phil?"

"Yeah?" The deputy raised up a little and flicked the perspiration from his broad forehead. His eyes were questioningly serene in their deeply set sockets.

The cowboy hunkered and dug the dried manure and mud out of the ridge above his boot sole with a sharp clasp knife. "Me an' Slim was out prowlin' around last night." Phil nodded patiently; he had suspected as much, in spite of what Chris had said. You can't drive spooky cattle to new range in the darkness, whether she had known it or not.

"We came across an old campfire an' figgered whoever built it hadn't been gone long." Still Phil said nothing, waiting patiently for the younger man to get to the point. "An' whoever camped up there, had a damned good reason fer hidin' out."

"How do you know, Liz?"

The boy snapped his knife shut with an emphatic gesture. "Because we found a half-burnt note in the embers of the fire."

Phil sensed something important and straightened up, letting the horse's leg drop tc the ground. He made a slight grimace as the nerves in his back crinkled unpleasantly, and took the paper Liz offered him from his shirt pocket. The few remaining words were amply clear. *"Same price, same way—clear."* There was no signature, and the rest of the message was gone; only a fringe of charred, blackened paper showed that there had been more to it. Phil fitted it into his preconceived theory and carefully tucked it into the sweatband of his black Stetson.

Liz was looking at him speculatively. He smiled ruefully. "It's a help all right, Liz. But it don't put me any closer to the glory guns."

"To the what?"

"To the killer."

"Oh."

"Where was that camp?"

"You know where Pilot Rock is?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'd say it was about a mile southeast. Over on Ditch Creek. On top of a knoll where the junipers are pretty thick."

Phil nodded slowly; he knew the spot. He turned back to the shoeing job. "Thanks, Liz." The cowboy nodded thoughtfully.

IT WAS COOL riding up the deer trails to the campsite Liz and Slim had found. Gerredge smiled to himself when an aroused and scolding bluejay raged at him as he invaded the sanctuary where few men had been, and those few hadn't tarried. At the camp, he studied the ground, the tracks and the litter, then he got a tingling surprise. From where he stood, by walking clear of the protective trees, he could look down onto the Littleton ranch buildings. He stood thoughtfully, surveying the neatness and evident prosperity of the big ranch. He could easily make out the cowboys bunching a small herd of cattle near the great corrals, and even the form of Archer junior talking to a broad-shouldered, lean-hipped rider, over near the house.

His eyes puckered a little. The gunman hadn't had too hard a time of it, planning and executing his assassination of old Archer Littleton. He went back, satisfied, and mounted his horse. The day was young. He turned the reluctant animal off the

trail back to Lowell and pushed him into the higher country out beyond. If his theory was correct, there was an exterminator back in there, somewhere, and he was patiently awaiting new orders—orders that would send the glory guns against another living target.

Chris saddled her horse with a preoccupied air. Slim watched her absently from the lean-to where the scattered leather tools were kept. He had almost had the rosadero torn off his saddle when a spooky colt had shied into a chokecherry bush with him, and was going to rivet the flapping fender back to the stirrup leather before he rode out.

Chris swung aboard her horse with grace and Slim, even at fifty, wasn't above noticing the way her body muscles firmed under the gait of the animal. He sighed a little, too, because each year he saw Chris accumulate, meant another one on him, which he neither needed or wanted, but couldn't avoid.

Slim was mildly puzzled, too, the way Chris had been acting lately. She rode out into the back country quite often, but wouldn't let either Liz or himself go with her, in spite of their repeated warnings that the hired killer might very likely be lurking back in the primitive area. On a sudden inspiration, he worked feverishly to finish rivetting the rosadero to the stirrup leather so he could follow her. There was definitely something going on that he felt he'd like to know more about; but the faster he worked, the fainter grew the sound of her horse's hoofbeats.

Deputy Gerredge's horse took him along fir-scented hogbacks and a sense of rhythmic comfort came over him in the still, fragrant warmth of the day. Somehow, instead of thinking of the two murdered men and the probability that the killer lay close by in the wilderness, his mind was filled with thoughts of Chris. He was even smiling a little at the way her eyes seemed to darken when she was angry. His horse sensed its rider's preoccupation and slowed to a shambling, indifferent walk.

Chris saw Emmet before he saw her. He was barely outlined among the pines but the sun had caught her eye when it reflected off the silver cheekpiece of the cowboy's bit. She rode up close, then he swung and rode down to meet her. He was shaking his grizzled head and frowning. "Nary a thing, Chris. Lots o' sign, but no bushwhacker."

Her grey eyes were anxious. "You don't suppose he's been frightened away, do you?"

Emmet's wry shake of the head was a good answer, even if he hadn't spoken. "No, ma'm. A feller as cold as that one just plain don't scare." He stopped wagging his head suddenly and squinted down along a timber slash. Chris followed his keen glance and caught the faint sound of a horse walking over occasional ridges of rock where a metallic sound from the animal's shoe was wafted softly, sullenly, through the high air.

"Emmet!"

"Shhhh. It might be. Listen: you stay up here an' cover the critter with my carbine," he deftly pulled his .30-.30 from its boot and handed it to the girl. "I'll slip down along that 'ere lower ridge an' get the drop on him as he comes along it below us."

He dismounted and handed the reins to Chris, started to shuck his spurs and looked up at the girl, who was standing, afoot, at the horse's head. "Chris, you be blamed careful now." His voice reminded her of when he had been stern with her years before, when she, a mischevious little tomboy, had done something he didn't like. "Remember I'm down there, too. If they's ary shootin', you be blamed

careful to keep hid—an' don't shoot me."

"Oh Emmet—"

"Yes." He wagged his head as he stalked off. "I know. You was raised with guns, but accidents happen, Chris. Remember that. Accidents happen." Then he was gone through the trees like a gnarled, grey old ghost, lean and hard as granite, hungry to avenge the death of a friend.

CHRIS FELT an odd constriction arise in her throat as the strange rider came up onto a burned-over clearing, rode across it and disappeared again. She kept an anxious eye on the horses, too, but evidently they hadn't seen the moving object, nor scented it, yet. Slowly she levered the carbine and waited. Tiny beads of glacial perspiration dotted her upper lip. She thought of Phil, and tried to shake the image of his thoughtful face out of her mind. Still, the image persisted and she finally acknowledged that she'd give almost anything to have him there, beside her.

Emmet was well hidden behind a jumble of deadwood washed into the upper lip of an erosion gully, waiting. He smiled wolfishly to himself. The still air lay close around him and the steady thumping of his heart was close behind the faded sweatiness of his work shirt. Maybe he'd hail the killer; and then again, maybe he'd just gutshoot him and watch him writhing in the dirt of the game trail. Better than a decade he and Doff had lived in the same bunkhouse. Anyway, a killer who'd ride right up and shoot a man in the back, like that, was too dangerous to try to take alive.

Emmet's hand was shaking when he smeared off the roiled sweat on his forehead, not with fear, but with an eagerness to kill. Chris had staked him out in the hope that he could find the killer, if he was still in the back country, where they'd figured he'd be. Well, he'd had a little discomfort on his own, too, slipping around like a wolf in a forest. He'd earned the right to kill the man. He risked a look up the hill but saw no sign of Chris; then his squinted, faded blue eyes went back down the trail as he heard the distant crack of a dry twig.

Phil reined up on the far side of a clearing, in the shade. He shook out the thoughts of Chris and looked over the endless, smoky grandeur of the great country. Somewhere, in there, was a killing machine, more deadly than any rattlesnake. A man given over to merciless murder, for pay. He wanted him badly enough to hunt for him, but it was a tremendous country. He shrugged. The day was still young, but it wouldn't be, by the time he got back to Lowell.

Somewhere ahead of him a horse blew its nose. He stiffened in the saddle, then reined quickly off the trail into the shadowy forest. A cowboy out hunting strayed cattle, maybe. Maybe, too, a venom-eyed killer, his haunted spirit riding down the back trails, head swinging from side to side, wary and deadly. He dismounted, tied his horse, shucked his spurs and tossed them around the saddle horn, yanked at his carbine and crept forward, parallel to the trail.

The sun was trying to get a glimpse of the drama unfolding under the giant firs and pines, and probed with brilliant fingers into the sparse clearings; but the forest was mostly dark with a melancholy and brooding greyness. It held many secrets, and still another was in the making.

Chris heard the horse coming now, then it stopped. She strained to hear, and the palms of her hands were moist with sweat. Somewhere, a long way off, a bluejay sounded his half-mocking, half-defiant, call, but close by there wasn't any sound at all. She sat

down weakly, the strain sapping her will like an open wound.

Emmet waited. He knew the rider had stopped and almost held his breath, wondering if he had been seen. The silence was maddening. Death was there, at his shoulder. He gripped the sixgun harder and let his thumb flicker over the hammer. He had made up his mind; he would take no chances. As soon as the man rode into sight, he'd kill him. His tongue ran wildly over his lips and disappeared into the rank cavern of his mouth.

- 3 -

PHIL'S curiosity arose within him. He squatted in the gloom and listened. A new sound came down the still air to him. A horseman was riding along his backtrail. Puzzled and altogether alert, he stole back toward his horse. So far as he knew, the 'glory guns' were ahead of him. Or, at least, *someone* was up ahead of him on the trail. But now there was someone coming along behind him, too. In a way, he felt relieved. The killer had no known accomplice so it quite likely was just a couple of riders out looking for cattle. Maybe it was Slim and Liz, from the Quartered Circle, or maybe Emmet and Slim.

He frowned to himself. He didn't recall seeing Emmet around the Quartered Circle for a long time now, come to think of it. He got no further. Somewhere south of him, coming up the gradual rise into the thick growth, was another rider. He made it back to his horse, but froze and listened. A premonition swept over him. Safe or un-safe, he didn't untie the horse. There was even the smell of evil in the air. He held his gun lightly in his fist, thumb resting softly on the hammer, and waited.

Emmet started suddenly in his lair. A rider was coming up the slope behind him, even as he heard another one coming down the trail toward him in the opposite direction from where he had heard the first rider stop. He licked his lips nervously and pressed in flat among the gnarled wreckage of dead limbs and forlorn fir needles. He breathed a prayer for Chris as the sound of the unseen riders came closer, one behind him and one off to his right. Then he risked a rattled look up the slope and saw the dim shadows of a man afoot slipping down through the high trees, behind Chris, obviously stalking her. Although Emmet couldn't see the girl, he knew where she was. He swore in a rasping whisper as his face blanched. It was coming to a head, now, but he would be the first casualty if he fired at Chris's attacker and gave his position away.

A movement on his right drew his attention. A rider was coming through the flecked patterns of sunlight, toward him. He couldn't see the man's face, but he didn't care. According to his lights, only he and Chris were legally in the uplands; and he meant that any others should die, since they were a direct threat. Slowly he edged the gun out while the rider came on, slowly, warily, his head swinging to right and left like a she-bear's head.

Ready to fight, contemptuous of death, but hoping for an even break, came "glory guns". He was riding to a rendezvous. There was a matter of collecting for a barnyard killing, but he didn't know that all hell was lying in front of him, waiting in a kaleidescope of deadly confusion, until —*BANG!*

A hoarse yell echoed over the for-

est. The killer dug in his spurs and thundered ahead, low and hurt in his saddle. His feverish, wild eyes were narrow above the steady gun in his left hand. When he came abreast of the rubble that hid Emmet, he rolled the barrel in a slight arc and pumped lead into the jerking, snapping refuse of the forest. Far down the hill below him, someone let out a roar of pain and rage and a hastily fired fusillade came tearing up the draw.

Phil was running forward, his feet making sibilant little thumps on the greasy needles, when he heard the thunder of an oncoming horse roaring down the trail behind him. He went over sideways and rolled limply out of sight as the rider whirled past. Archer Littleton, junior!

CHRIS HAD the rifle to her shoulder to fire when she heard the jingle of a spur behind her. She whirled and squeezed the trigger. All in one smooth motion, but her target had seen her start the turn and had dropped flat. The carbine roared and bucked and the bullet whined off into the distance.

"Gawdalmighty, girl!" Slim lay there white as a ghost, his eyes big and round. Chris let the wobbly gust of air escape from her like a punctured balloon.

"Slim! Oh Slim!" Then her relief gave way to cold anger. "You fool, Slim! You utter damned fool!"

Slim was on his knees, blushing furiously and knocking the needles off his shirt. "Yes'm," he said, contritely. Then he crept closer and motioned her down. She went, half kneeling, half falling, her face a livid blotch of white. The world was whirling like a pinwheel but she forced it to slow a little then stop. The bitter taste of gunpowder was in her mouth.

Phil waited until the wounded gunman got close. So close he could easily see his twisted, suffering, half-crazed eyes, then he levelled his gun and squeezed the trigger. The man's body was knocked violently upright in the saddle. It hung there for a flashing second, then a .45 roared back down the trail and Phil could hear the crashing impact. The glory guns spilled like blue-black blood out of their owner's hands and his body toppled awkwardly and struck the ground. The horse was running in wild panic and the body bounced twice before its limpness lay quiescent, flatter, lumpy and drab, closer to the earth that was to receive it, at last, than it had ever been before.

A shot rang out, and Phil ducked involuntarily. He flicked back the hammer to fire again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something moving up above, on a ledge. He threw himself sideways as a carbine spoke in the shattered quiet. Someone cried out up ahead of him below the trail. He heard jingling spurs coming through the trees toward him and lay perfectly still until a body came into focus. He raised his gun slightly and peered up at the face. "Hold it, Littleton. Don't even move an eyelash!"

Littleton's body was sideways as he tried to see if there was any pursuit, when Phil nailed him. He froze, his gun tight in a frantic grip, but uncocked. He knew the voice. "Drop it!"

Littleton let the gun fall and began to turn. He had a sense of guilt, but his sense of bewilderment was greater. He was supposed to meet one man up here, near the campsite—and so far as he knew, only one man. Plus his cold-eyed foreman, of course, whom he had told to come up the erosion gulch, for mutual protection. But now there were two people on an upper ledge, overlooking the trail, another one hidden in the erosion gully itself, and now the deputy from Lowell, as well.

"What d'ya mean, Gerredge, goin' around shootin' at people?"

"You tell *me,* Littleton. Although I'd better warn you I think I know enough about this rendezvous to hang you."

"Don't threaten me, you tinkertown lawman. Why, I can break—"

"Couldn't you wait for the old man to die in bed? Did you suppose, for one minute, that hired guns wouldn't haunt you for the rest of your life, every time they get a little low on money? Littleton, you're a bigger fool than I thought you were."

Someone was shouting up the trail. Phil stopped talking and listened.

"Emmet, ya danged old fool, answer up. Are ya hit?" There was a pause, then a fearful, shaken voice came back muffled by the welter of dead foliage over Emmet's perplexed head.

"No, dang yore mangy hide. How in hell's sake did you get up thar with Chris, ya pussy-footin' old fool."

Slim laughed heartily. "Well; come out of yore hole now, ya old gopher. All the fightin's over with. Yore safe now."

"Like hell," came back the irate reply. "This here country's plumb creepin' with gunhawks. Why, they's even one down the draw from me somewhere. I heard him screech a while back."

SLIM SNORTED and winked at Chris. "I nailed that 'ere un in the middle of the battle. They's on'y one left, an' he's went off in a dead run fer the bushes." For a long moment there wasn't a sound. Phil jabbed Littleton forward and motioned back through the trees the way he had come.

Emmet raised his battered old Stetson tentatively on a twig. Slim raised his carbine on a sudden inspiration, but Chris grabbed his arm and his gleeful expression melted. She couldn't altogether repress the smile though, as Emmet's old hat, an obvious fraud, twirled idly on the stick.

"Come on, Emmet. It's safe." At the sound of Chris' voice, the scanty grey hair came over the edge of bristling needles like a walrus coming up over the edge of an ice floe. Slim and Chris laughed at the ridiculous apparition. Emmet swung his head to the left and his mouth dropped open.

"I'll be plumb hornswoggled," he told himself. Clambering out of the hiding place, he hastily dusted himself off and went forward to meet Phil and the prisoner. "What in hell's Littleton doin' up here, Phil?"

The deputy smiled wanly at the lowering rancher. "Keep a gun on him until I pick some of these loose horses around here, will you, Emmet?"

"Yeah, but—" He let it die away as Phil turned abruptly and hiked back through the trees. It wouldn't take long to get back to the Quartered Circle, and then there'd be ample time to compare notes. Emmet squinted into Littleton's face as Slim and Chris rode down to them. "I allus suspected you of no good, young feller." He waved the cocked gun under the sulking prisoner's nose. "Never trusted ary o' yore clan, fer that matter. No sir. Never did, that's a fact. Never did."

Phil said little until they were at the Quartered Circle house. Liz watched them all ride in with a gaping mouth. He saw the two led horses with their grisly burdens of the hired killer and the Littleton foreman. "Lord!" He said, flabbergasted. "Lord!"

"It just took common sense, Chris. The 'glory guns' picked a spot where they could see the Littleton buildings. It didn't make sense to me, that the killer would need to study his prey; he didn't make any study of Doff. He just rode in and shot him and rode out, counting on surprise and that thorobred race horse to get him in the clear. So, when I saw he'd camped there, and got the note Liz found, too, well, I sort of figured young Littleton

wanted his dad out of the way." Phil's grey eyes raked over the prisoner. "I was pretty well convinced when I remembered how he told me he wouldn't stand for no—"

"Any."

"Uh—yeah; 'any' local lawmen cluttering up the investigation of his dad's killing."

Chris' face was calmly sober. She looked at Slim, who was blushing wildly, remembering how close she had come to shooting him. "And you. I saw you working on your saddle when I rode out."

Slim fidgetted in his chair. "Yes'm. But I figgered you was up to somethin', you an' Emmet, who ain't been on the ranch fer nigh onto a month, so I trailed you." He had his mouth opened to say more, but Phil, sensing his discomfort, interrupted.

"Littleton, there's just one thing I can't figure out. Why in hell—"

"Heck."

Phil's grey eyes swung back to Chris and locked with her glance. There was a brief, wordless struggle, then her head dropped ever so little and her mouth curled upwards contentedly, submissively. "Hell," she said very softly. Phil nodded thoughtfully and turned back to Littleton.

"Why in hell did you kill Doff Curry?" He shrugged slightly. "I know he had a secret, but how could it affect you?"

Littleton's face was sardonically contemptuous. "To hell with Doff's secret. I didn't know he had one, or care, either, for that matter. He was shot by mistake." The brittle eyes swept over Liz. "That's the man I paid to have killed. I even described him to the gunhawk, and still he got the wrong man."

PHIL SIGHED. As simple as that; a mistake. Doff's secret was instantly pigionholed in a vault of no return in the deputy's mind. "Why did you want Liz killed?"

"Because, with that punk kid out of the way, I'd have clear field with Christel." Phil heard the girl gasp but didn't take his eyes off the rancher.

"Are you in love with her, Littleton?" Phil's tone was low, vibrantly low and pregnant with suspense.

Littleton tossed his head and laughed bitterly. "Lord no. But I'd of married her to get control of the Quartered Circle, in order to insure uninterrupted access to the uplands. In that way all the out-range would have belonged to me. You see? I could have expanded with no limit to the number of cattle I could have run; and at the same time would have twice as much land, plus a fairly good cook."

Chris' eyes flashed. "*Fairly* good cook! Why you pasty, over-educated, damned—"

"Whoa! Whoa, Chris." Phil had her by the arm. "Remember," he said with a remonstrating shake of his head, "there are gentlemen present." He jutted his chin toward a very startled Emmet and Slim, as well as a nonplussed Liz. "Let's go, Littleton; you got a long ride an' an abrupt end, ahead of you."

Littleton arose and cast a venemous look around the room. He was going to say something and Phil surmised what it would be, so he shoved him roughly toward the door. "Outside, tough guy. Outside." On the threshhold he turned and looked wistfully over at Chris. "Ma'm, just how good a cook are you, really?"

"Promptly at seven o'clock this evening, I'll show you."

Phil Gerredge's face split from ear to ear with relief and pleasure. "That's what I hoped you'd say." He bowed gallantly from the waist. "I'll be back, Chris, promptly at seven."

★

One-Half Tompkins sure looked and acted loco, and French Demeree contended that a crazy man is not legally responsible if he kills someone. But Judge Steele figured that "crazy" could sometimes mean "crazy like a fox".

A MIND FOR KILLING

Judge Steele Story

BY LON WILLIAMS

WARDLOW STEELE, Flat Creek's relentless judge, sat down once more to administer justice. In his opinion, Justice was a term for certain and unfeeling retaliation; in other words, life for life. As usual, lawyers were present; as usual, he was in a bad mood. Why dispensation of justice required a battle with consarned lawyers, he couldn't figure. Why Flat Creek citizens had elected an ignoramus like him to be their judge, he could figure less. Vigies had done a good job, and done it efficiently. According to his lights, this court was doing a bad job, and doing it most inefficiently.

His mood worsened when a grinning ape on a puncheon bench reserved for doomsday pilgrims lifted a hand, jiggled skinny fingers and screeched, "Howdy, Judge."

That was an illustration of what he meant. Vigies would've had this job done and over long since. His breath spewed; he gave his straw-colored mustache a couple of vicious jerks. "Sheriff, call court."

Sheriff Jerd Buckalew rose, tall, raw-boned and poker-faced, and pounded with his forty-five. "Court's now in session. Don't let your doubts give you a sore neck."

Heavily armed deputies hitched up their gunbelts and nodded. Armed Vigies looked on placidly, ready to lend moral support, if needed. Spectators settled to stillness.

Steele nodded again. "Skiffy, call fust case."

Clerk James Skiffington, thin and tall, rose with tomb-like solemnity. "People *versus* Hull, alias One-half, Tompkins. Charge, first-degree murder."

Defendant Tompkins put his head down low and blinked apishly up at Steele. "That's me, Judge." He put his hands over his face and snickered, then removed them and blew on his fingers.

Steele's nostrils dilated; his blue eyes glared savagely. "Murder, eh? Beconsarned, when monkeys start murdering citizens, we'd better hide out."

"Why, Judge!" One-half Tompkins chided. "You ought not say things like that; ain't no monkey murdered nobody."

"One-Half Tompkins was always stealing things from the store."

"We'll mighty soon find out," Steele retorted coldly. "You got a lawyer?"

A slender, dark-haired, thin-faced character in black suit, white vest and four-in-hand necktie got up quietly. "I am his lawyer, your honor. French Demeree."

Steele's jaw muscles tightened. "Yeah, Demeree from Tennessee. By thunder, Demeree, ain't you wasting your talents, defending filthy-minded scum like that?"

"Your honor," replied Demeree smoothly, "neither a client's state of mind, nor his wealth or poverty, is any measure of a lawyer's sense of duty."

"Mighty eloquent," Steele returned sourly. "Justice is a blind goddess who puts her trust in lawyers. Well, if you ask me, she'd better take off her blindfold and take a look now and then at what she's trustin'. Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead with noble brow and unperturbed countenance arose on

Steele's left. "Wade Claybrook, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele regarded his man Claybrook with mixed sentiments. "Well, Wade, ain't you ashamed to be jumpin' on a poor brainless baboon like One-half Tompkins?"

"He has a brain, your honor, though I should hardly regard him as a second Aristotle."

"In other words," Steele returned, "he's got too much sense to be an idiot, but not enough to be a halfwit."

CLAYBROOK retained his stiff dignity. "That could be another way of putting it, your honor, though it is hardly proper to prejudge a defendant."

"Now, see hyar, Claybrook," Steele stormed angrily, "you get off your mountain-top of purity and righteousness, and see that this murderin' chimpanzee is hung."

"Every defendant is a human being, sir," Claybrook flared. "As such, he is entitled to be tried before he is condemned to be executed."

One-half Tompkins lowered his head and snickered toward Claybrook. "He's my friend, Judge; you let him alone"

Steele crimped his lips and stared at Tompkins. According to his lights, here was about to be an awful waste of time. When Flat Creek citizens decided to abandon Vigie methods in favor of a law court, they should've reserved authority in themselves for exceptional cases like this.

He growled fiercely, "All right, you snickering jackal, what's your plea?"

Demeree had remained standing. "Defendant has a dual plea, your honor. First, he denies having committed homicide. Second, if it should appear that he did kill somebody, he pleads insanity. As an obvious *non compos mentis,* he could have had no *mens rea*—no guilty mind. *Actus non facit reum, nisi mens sit rea.*"

"Consarn you, Demeree, maybe you know what you're talking about, but in this court's language it means a rope for every murderin' neck, if he can quote Blackstone in six languages or in none. Panel a jury, Bucky."

"Call names, Skiffy."

Skiffington called names and twelve gold-diggers and Vigies arranged themselves as jurors and swore truth to find and justice to administer without fear or favor. Witnesses were called, sworn and segregated.

"Claybrook, call your fust witness."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy sheriff. "Call Boaz Welfare."

Demeree, who had sat down, got up with confident expression. "Now, if your honor please, Mr. Claybrook is undertaking to establish a *corpus delicti.* As he is about to try a crazy man, I move that he be first required to prove that this defendant is competent to stand trial."

Claybrook waited until Boaz Welfare had been seated. "Now, your honor, Mr. Demeree should have known better than make that motion. He should know that an accused person is presumed sane until insanity is proved by *him,* not by somebody else."

"Your honor," responded Demeree, "it must have been apparent to every person who has known him that this defendant is crazy. A fact of continuing nature is presumed to continue unchanged."

"But, your honor," said Claybrook, "it is presumed that ordinary faculties are possessed by every individual."

Demeree lifted his chin. "If your honor please, every accused person is presumed to be of good character, also."

Steele exhaled like a fire-spewing dragon. "Be-consarned, lawyers are an obstacle and a hindrance to justice; if if ain't one thing, it's another. Now you're engaged in a war of presumptions. What it'll be next, nobody could predict. Claybrook, question your witness."

Claybrook gave his mouth a twist

and glared at Welfare. "Your name is Boaz Welfare?"

Welfare's round face assumed haughtiness. He looked down his nose at Claybrook. "I am Boaz Welfare, sir. I am also coroner of Flat Creek. Last Thursday a week ago I received notice that a dead body had been found in a dry well in Upper Sarlay Gulch, where there used to be considerable diggings, but not anymore. It being my duty as coroner to conduct an investigation, I repaired to this place without delay—"

Demeree was up. "If your honor please, this witness was not asked to make a speech. He was merely asked to verify his name."

"That is correct," Claybrook said quickly. He glared at Welfare, whose skin had pinked with displeasure. "You *are* Boaz Welfare, aren't you?"

"I am, sir."

"Sometimes called General Welfare?"

Inside heat caused Welfare to spew. "If that's got anything to do with anything, I'd like to know what it is."

STEELE'S blood pressure went up. "Now, see hyar, General, you answer questions, and answer 'em as they're put. If you don't, by thunder, I'll fine you for contempt of court."

Welfare stuck out his lower lip and stared sulkily at Claybrook. "Yes," he said.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I am sometimes called General Welfare."

"All right," said Claybrook. "On last Thursday-week you say you *went* to Upper Sarlay Gulch to investigate a dead body?"

"I did."

"Did you find there a dead body?"

"Yes."

"Did you examine it?"

"I did."

"Did you recognize it?"

"No."

"Did you have it identified?"

"I summoned a coroner's jury, not only for purposes of identification and inquiry into circumstances which might or might not indicate that deceased had come to his death by means of foul play, but also—"

"If your honor please," said Demeree, "he's about to make another speech. Defendant objects."

Claybrook cut in ahead of Steele's hot anger. "Now, General, if you please, answer my questions."

"I've been answering your questions, sir."

Steele boiled over. "Consarn you, General, you don't talk back to Mr. Claybrook like that. I fine you five dollars for contempt of court. Bucky, see it's paid, else put him on bread and water."

Claybrook assumed an air of satisfaction. "Now, Mr. Welfare, did you have that dead body identified?"

Welfare, beat but furious, remained silent for several seconds. Then he said sulkily, "I did."

"Whose was it?"

"Alec Spitstone."

"More commonly known as Tobacco Spitstone?"

"I don't know."

"Ever heard him called Tobacco Spitstone?"

Demeree got up. "Your honor, this is being unfair to Mr. Welfare. Whether deceased was one kind of Spitstone or another is immaterial, so long as Mr. Welfare is positive that he was dead."

"I am positive," said Welfare.

"Did you ascertain how Spitstone came by his death?"

"He was murdered."

"Object," Demeree shouted. "Answer should be responsive to questions."

"All right, all right," said Welfare. "He'd been struck with a miner's pickaxe, and it had made a square hole in his head. He'd been struck from behind. If that ain't proof positive—"

"You say you are coroner of Flat Creek?" Claybrook interposed quick-

ly, for Judge Steele was about to bear down again.

"I am."

"And you summoned a coroner's jury?"

"I did."

"And it was this jury's verdict that Spitstone had been murdered?"

"It was."

Claybrook sat down. "That is all."

DEMEREE came round to cross-examine. "You mentioned a well, I believe?"

"I did, sir."

"You also mentioned that old Spittoon's body had been found in a well, did you not?"

"I did."

Demeree rubbed his chin reflectively. "And you went down in that well and examined his body?"

"I did not."

"No?"

"Certainly not."

"Do you mean to say this dead body had been moved before you went to examine it?"

"It had. When I arrived, it was lying on a plank in broad daylight."

"Ah!" exclaimed Demeree. "Then somebody could have made that square hole in its skull after it was brought up?"

"I suppose so."

"Did you call that fact to your jury's attention?"

"No."

"Just what did you and your jury do in determining that Spittoon had been murdered?"

"Well, we all took a look and walked off. I hope you don't think we'd get chummy with a body that had been dead several days, and—"

"Quite right," said Demeree. "Thank you, General."

Demeree returned to his seat and Welfare was excused.

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Call Watson Overend."

Defendant One-half Tompkins got Steele's eyes and snickered. "Fun, ain't it, Judge?"

Steele caught his breath. "Demeree!"

Demeree got up. "Yes, your honor."

"Do you insist that your client's crazy?"

"No, your honor," replied Demeree; "there's no need of insisting on what is obvious."

"Do you think he knows what is going on hyar?"

"He has no conception whatever of its significance."

"Then I suggest you give his head a whack and put him to sleep. If you don't keep him quiet, by thunder, we'll hang him without a trial."

"Yes, your honor."

Demeree sat down and whispered something to One-half that might have caused a lip-reader to blush. One-half lowered his head and blew on his fingers. But he kept quiet.

Claybrook's second witness had been brought in and seated. He had black whiskers and stubby, work-hardened hands. Judge Steele remembered him as an old Vigie comrade, quiet, but efficient and fearless.

Claybrook eyed him briefly. "You are Watson Overend?"

"I am."

"Gold-digger?"

"Yes."

"Were you acquainted with deceased, Alec Spitstone?"

"We owned adjoining claims in Lower Sarlay Gulch."

"Will you just answer my questions, please?"

Steele leaned forward. "Mr. Claybrook," he said with dangerous quietness, "when we've got a good witness like Overend, it's not a bad idear to just set down and let him tell what he knows." He nodded significantly, and Claybrook sat down. "Now, Mr. Witness, tell; what you know about this murder."

OVEREND angled himself toward Steele. "Well, Judge, it's sort of a

long story; but this is it. In Lower Sarlay, Von Dale and myself come to our diggin's one morning."

Steele recognized an old familiar name. "By Von Dale do you mean him that was called Hill-and-dale?"

"That's right, Judge. Same old Hill-and-dale you used to know."

"Go ahead," said Steele.

"Well, Judge, that morning when Tobacco Spitstone failed to show up, we got uneasy. I reckon you recollect, Judge, how Tobacco had that foolish habit of counting his money in public. Well, we figured somebody had murdered him for his money. That evening, we inquired at his boarding place, but he hadn't showed up there either. Next day we started looking and inquiring around. Somebody remembered seeing him headed toward Upper Sarlay, by hisself. We spent hours looking for him up there, but with no luck. Next day we went again. We had just set down to rest in a shady spot when Hill-and-dale spied somebody slipping up Sarlay. We hid and watched. There was an old well up there, dug by a miner named Hopstettler couple years ago. While we watched, that feller we'd seen slipping up Sarlay Gulch dodged about from rock to gully and gully rock until he'd reached that well. There he bent over and looked in. It took him some time to get his eyes used to looking down into darkness, but he finally got satisfied. Before we could get near him, howsomever, he'd slipped away again."

Demeree started to rise. "If I may interrupt, your honor—"

"Demeree, you're overruled."

"But I had not stated my objection, your honor."

"You're overruled anyhow. Overend, proceed."

"Well, Judge," said Overend, "Dale and me went to that well and looked in. Dale had a piece of looking-glass in his pocket. We used that to throw down some sunlight, and we knew our search was over. Alec Spitstone was lying down there dead." Overend paused for study.

"Are you through?" asked Steele.

"No, Judge," said Overend. "I was just trying to think how this idea come up. Well, anyhow, Dale and me discussed whether to report what we'd found. Then Dale remembered a case something like this that happened back in Missouri when he was a boy. There's Scripture, too, which says a dog will return to its vomit, or something to that effect. Anyhow, we figured whoever that was who'd come to look in Hopstettler's well would come back again. So we hid close by and kept an eye out for him. Sure enough, just before sundown we saw him coming. Same feller. But this time, when he come and peeped in, we crope up behind and jumped him."

"Who was he?" asked Steele.

"One-half Tompkins, Judge."

"What did he do when you grabbed him?"

"He jumped like a caught rabbit, but we held onto him. When he saw he couldn't get away—"

"Object," shouted Demeree. "He can't draw conclusions like that. How does he know what went on in what is optimistically called this defendant's mind?"

STEELE took one look at Demeree, but said nothing. Demeree sat down.

"Overend, go ahead with your story."

"Well, Judge, after Tompkins quieted down, he put his face behind his hands and snickered. Then he took his hands away from his face and blew on his fingers. We fetched him down to Flat Creek and turned him over to Sheriff Buckalew. We questioned him right sharply, too, but all he'd do was snicker and blow on his fingers. That's about it, Judge."

"I'd like to cross-examine," said Demeree.

"Much as I regret it, Demeree," said Steele, "it's your privilege."

Demeree came round. "Your name is Watson Overend?"

"It is."

"Sometimes called End Overend?"

"Yes, Mr. Demeree."

"Do you regard yourself as sane or insane?"

"Well, Mr. Demeree, I sometimes figure I'm crazy, especially when I think of that good piece of land I left back in Tennessee."

Demeree's eyebrows went up. "Do you mean to say you're from Tennessee?"

"That's correct, Mr. Demeree."

Demeree backed away. "Thank you, Mr. Overend; no more questions."

Overend went out and Steele glared at Demeree. "Consarn you, Demeree, is that some backhanded way you thought up to discredit Watson Overend's testimony?"

"No, your honor," Demeree replied haughtily. "I regard Mr. Overend as a man of unimpeachable integrity. If your honor would care to know my reason, it is this. I have never known a Tennessean who was afraid of anything or anybody, or who'd swear to a lie. Mr. Overend does not impress me as being an exception."

Steele's contempt came out in a puff. "By thunder, Demeree, you've just about bragged your client's neck into a hangrope." He swung left. "Call next witness, Claybrook."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Call Pulliam Oemig."

Oemig was a well-dressed, gray-haired gentleman of about fifty, with big ears and rectangular spectacles. He glanced at One-half Tompkins, who snickered and blew on his fingers.

Claybrook rose and faced Oemig. "What is your business, Mr. Oemig?"

"General merchandise, sir."

"In other words, you own a store in Flat Creek?"

"I do."

"Were you acquainted with deceased, Alec Spitstone?"

"I was."

"When did you see him last?"

"About two weeks ago. He came into my store and bought a plug of tobacco."

"With what kind of money did he pay you?"

"Paper money."

"Did you observe anything peculiar about that money?"

"Yes, Mr. Claybrook. It was red along one edge Spitstone had it in a pouch as part of a rather large roll. He also had in his pouch a piece of cinnabar, which he said he had found in a ledge on his claim. This cinnabar had stained one end of his roll of bills."

Demeree got up. "Your honor, this line of testimony is wholly irrelevant. I move it be stricken, and that Mr. Claybrook directed to confine his questions to matters that are pertinent."

"My questions are pertinent, your honor."

"Go ahead, Claybrook," snapped Steele.

"Mr. Oemig, are you acquainted with defendant, One-half Tompkins?"

"Too well acquainted, if I may say so."

"Now, your honor," said Demeree, "this witness was not asked to testify as to degree of acquaintanceship. Instead of answering yes or no, he goes out of his way to make unfavorable insinuations."

"Oemig," said Steele, "quit going out of your way to make insinuations. Make 'em straight."

Demeree frowned and sat down.

CLAYBROOK hesitated; apparently he was inclined to agree with Demeree. He glanced at Steele, then at Oemig. "Mr. Oemig, had defendant Tompkins been a customer at your store?"

"Defendant Tompkins has procured many things at my store."

"How do you mean that?"

"I mean that he is a confirmed and incorrigible thief."

"Object!" stormed Demeree. "This

old fossil was not asked to testify as a character witness. Besides, when one is indicted for murder, it is not competent for witnesses to make him out a thief, or to give testimony as to other crimes. I object."

"Mr. Demeree is right," said Claybrook. "I—"

"Now see hyar, Claybrook," raged Steele, "maybe Demeree *is* right but, you don't have to admit he is."

Claybrook lowered his head and glared at Oemig through his eyebrows. "Regardless of defendant's propensity to steal, has he ever bought anything from you and paid money for it?"

"Yes, he has," replied Oemig, "and if you will permit me, I shall relate in some detail."

"Proceed."

"Well, sir, I mentioned that Spitstone was in my store on a Monday and bought tobacco. Also, that his money was stained with cinnabar. One or two days after Spitstone was in my store, this thieving One-Half Tompkins came in to buy a shirt. He was wearing one that had stains on it that looked like blood. I found a shirt his size, and he took out a pouch to pay me. If that pouch wasn't Spitstone's, it was one exactly like it. Inside it was a roll of bills, and when Tompkins paid me I discovered that same red stain that had been on Spitstone's bills."

"Did you know then that Spitstone had disappeared?"

"No. I didn't hear about that until several days later, when word got around that his dead body had been found."

"Did you ask One-half Tompkins any questions?"

"Yes. I asked him where he got his money. He snickered and said he traded for it."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Demeree got up, received a grudging nod from Steele and came round. "Your name, I believe, is Pulliam Oemig?"

"It is, sir," Oemig answered hostilely.

"Sometime called Push-'em Oemig?"

Oemig replied dryly, "Sometimes."

"You push your customers pretty hard, don't you?"

"I'm not in business for my health, sir."

A slight disturbance caused big Deputy Dan Trewhitt to walk slowly past defendant Tompkins and restore order. Meanwhile Steele had glimpsed something that caused his breath to catch. He motioned to Trewhitt, who came round and leaned in toward Steele. Steele whispered at length in his ear and he nodded and went out a back way.

Steele returned his attention to Demeree and Oemig.

Demeree asked, "You say defendant Tompkins has stolen things in your store?"

"Repeatedly," said Oemig with emphasis. "He'd steal, knowing you were looking at him."

Demeree mumbled loudly enough to be heard by jurors, "sounds crazy." He returned to his seat and sat down. "That is all."

Claybrook shook his head. "No more witnesses, your honor."

STEELE TURNED to Demeree. "You got any witnesses in behalf of this stupid monkey?"

Demeree shook his head slowly. "For this poor lunatic, I neither have nor need any witnesses, your honor."

"You don't need to call him a lunatic, Demeree," Steele said bitingly. "Just call him what he is—a stinking, flea-bitten, stupid monkey."

Tompkins grinned. "You got fleas, Judge?" He snickered behind his hands, then blew on his fingers.

"Your plea of insanity looks kind of sick, Demeree," said Steele. "According to Mr. Claybrook, your snickering ape is presumed sane until you prove him otherwise. You had better get busy."

"He has been proven otherwise, your honor," said Demeree. "An act does not make a man guilty, unless he be so in

intention. *Actus non facit reum, nisi mens sit rea.* It is fundamental that a guilty mind must attend a guilty act, or it is no crime. One has not a guilty mind, unless he knows right from wrong. According to Mr. Oemig's testimony, this poor demented creature does *not* know right from wrong, for Oemig testified that Tompkins would steal even though he was being watched and knew it. He is what is known as a kleptomaniac, and kleptomania is a well-known form of insanity. Being able to distinguish right from wrong is an essential element of guilt. That element is lacking in this demented person's case. Accordingly, he should be set free."

Steele tensed and leaned forward. "By thunder, Demeree, I was just waiting to see if you had enough gall to suggest we turn that murderin' hyena loose."

Claybrook had got up. Here was his opportunity to engage in legalistic jousting with a worthy opponent. "If I may speak, your honor, I think I can answer Mr. Demeree's argument."

"Stomp on him, if you want to, Claybrook."

"Figuratively speaking, that is what I intend to do," said Claybrook. "I am sure Mr. Demeree is thinking about a famous English case of several years ago, known as M'Naghten's case. Truly, English judges laid down as a test of criminal responsibility defendant's capacity to distinguish right from wrong. But that is putting it loosely. They would distinguish *animo furandi* from *animor homicidi* by pointing out mental variants in individuals."

"If I may interrupt?" said Demeree.

For a very special reason, Steele was not only willing, but anxious, for these talkative lawyers to kill some time. "Go right ahead, Demeree."

"Thank you, your honor," said Demeree. "What Mr. Claybrook intends to say is that a jaybird who does not know it is wrong to steal might still know it is wrong to commit murder. But that is saying that a man is insane, yet not insane. Back in my native state, your honor, a man is guilty if he knows he is violating a law by his act. In other words, he must know that what he does is a *legal* wrong.

Claybrook retorted with temper, "I should like to remind Mr. Demeree that back in his native state, every man is presumed to know what is law and what isn't. Furthermore, I shall thank Mr. Demeree not to undertake to state what my intentions were. I am quite capable of speaking for myself."

"My apology," said Demeree. "I was misinformed."

"Now, see hyar," said Steele, a bite in his speech. "Nothing would please me more than to see you lawyers swaller each other, but don't do it hyar. What we want is to get this stinkin' monkey strung up."

"Sorry, your honor," said Claybrook. "But Mr. Demeree would confuse this court as to insanity as a defense. M'Naghten's rule, which is followed in Mr. Demeree's State of Tennessee, requires only that defendant knew he was doing wrong when he stuck a pickaxe in Tobacco Spitstone's skull. That has nothing to do with his knowing, or not knowing, it is wrong to steal."

"If your honor please," said Demeree, "has Mr. Claybrook proved that defendant knew it was wrong to stick a pickaxe in Tobacco's skull?"

"I do not have to prove it," retorted Claybrook. "He is presumed sane; he is presumed to have known his act was wrong."

STEELE WAS getting ready to urge them on, when Dan Trewhitt came back in. He caught Trewhitt's attention and lifted an eyebrow.

Trewhitt stepped out and walked past defendant Tompkins, ostensibly to restore order again.

Steele continued, "In Flat Creek we've got a few presumptions of our own. When a snickerin' jackass who hides behind his hands and blows on

his fingers decides to rob and murder a law-biding citizen, it's presumed he knows what he's doing. When he sinks a pickaxe into said citizens's brain and hides his body in a well, it's presumed he knowed he'd done something wrong. And that's a further presumption—a conclusive one, by thunder—namely, that when a foul-brained, snickerin', thievin' specimen of human scum commits murder hyarabouts he'll be strung up with a rope, and he'll hang thar till he's a dead corpse."

Events exploded then. Dan Trewhitt had loitered near One-half Tompkins, his sixgun dangling against One-half's shoulder. Tompkins moved with unanticipated and unbelievable swiftness. He snatched Trewhitt's gun from its holster and sprang erect.

"Now," he said with restrained fury, "we'll see who is human scum hereabouts."

Steele had risen. "Let nobody move," he roared. "Keep your hands away from your guns."

Deputies who were standing lifted their hands. Sheriff Jerd Buckalew's forty-five lay before him. But Bucky kept his hands down.

"I'm shore sorry, Judge," said Dan Trewhitt, who had raised his own hands.

"It's all right, Dan," said Steele; "just don't try to do anything."

"No," said One-half Tompkins. "Don't try to do anything. If you do, I'll put a slug in your smart judge's jumping heart. It's good to see him scared. He figured he could call me a monkey because he was a judge and had a pack of gunnies around him. Well, Judge, why don't you call me a monkey now? Come on, let me hear you say it. No? Maybe I will end up with a rope around my neck, but you won't be there to see it. Maybe I won't have a chance to throw your dead body in a well, but you'll be put under ground anyhow, and it won't be long."

"Let nobody move," said Steele. "Keep away fom your guns; this low-born ape's dangerous."

"Ah!" said One-half. "So you called me an ape again. I warned you, didn't I?"

"Let nobody move," said Steele.

One-half thumbed his sixgun hammer. Its click-click sounded ominous and imminent. "No," said One-half. "Let nobody move." In one swift move he aimed and triggered at Steele's heart. But there was no smoke, nor was there any thunder. One-half's gun hammer snapped dully, nothing more.

"All right, Dan," said Steele, "you can take him now."

Trewhitt grabbed his gun and shoved One-half onto his seat. "Shore was a good trick, judge. But how you read this monkey's mind beats me."

Judge Steele sat down. Out-going breath of relieved spectators was like a gust of wind.

Steele spoke to Trewhitt. "Fust time you ambled past that baboon, Dan, I saw him eyeing your gun. He didn't do it like a crazy man either, by thunder." He swung his savage blue eyes in French Demeree's direction. "M'Naghten's rule, eh?" He extended his contempt toward Claybrook. "Instead of arguing all around Robin Hood's barn about whether One-half Tompkins knowed his head at his jury. "You jurors go out and fetch in a verdict."

They filed out and came back shortly. A bearded gold-digger remained standing. "Guilty, Judge. First-degree murder."

Steele looked down at Sheriff Buckalew. "All right, Bucky. String him."

Within two minutes Flat Creek's court room had rumbled itself empty. Judge Steele sat alone and caught a moment's relaxation. But that moment was not entirely free of worry. Beconsarned if he could see why there had to be so much fuss and waste of time in hanging a murderer.

★

On this street in Los Angeles was a dirt trail; and along this trail, the final act of a sinful drama took place...

BETRAYAL ON THE LOS FELIZ

Special Feature

The "bandit" leaped ont . . .

by M. B. KREISER

IN LOS ANGELES, the City of the Angels, there is a street called Los Feliz. "The Street of the Happy." This delightful name, with its gracious Spanish air, once seemed an omen of evil. The ancient dirt trail—whose general direction today's modern street is said to follow—was the scene of a most astonishing betrayal...and sudden, brutal death.

The crime, according to existing records, sprang from a pattern familiar since time began: the trusting husband, the faithless wife, the treacherous lover. Its punishment—dealt out coolly and determinedly by a citizens' committee of the town's most prominent men—came some fifteen years before the first Vigilance Committee was formed in San Francisco. This citizens' committee heralded the birth of the famous Vigilance organization.

Well over a century ago three people, looking for love, rode their separate ways over the trail—and met briefly, fatally, in the wild beautiful country of the far West. The Los Feliz then was little more than a path winding lazily along from the town to the foothills... to fresh water...to the Rancho Los Feliz. "The Happy Ranch." The three riders of this particular tragedy held quite different hopes and dreams. Happiness mocked and escaped all three; each died heavy-hearted, in sorrow. Thus runs a tale of the turbulent days of early California.

Domingo, master of the sprawling Rancho Los Feliz, was a powerfully built, kindhearted, rather handsome man—and rich. But Domingo was no longer young, and he was lonesome. "What is the good," he wondered, "to have a rancho with so much land and

horses and servants, if there is no beloved lady here as mistress of my home and heart?" So Domingo set out looking for a bride to share his fortune.

The times were troubled. That year, 1836, two Mexican governors had been driven out of office; frequent political disturbances hampered the countryside. Los Angeles had been declared a city the year before and named the capitol, but the latter was not enforced and was soon repealed. There was growing discontent with Mexican rule, and foreign interference was much talked about. President Andrew Jackson wanted to buy part of California for the United States; his offer was refused.

Terrible jealousies spread everywhere—jealousies between the northern and southern sections of the area, between towns, between families. There was lawlessness and conflict of authority.

What of it? Domingo knew that the times are almost always troubled by jealousies and dissatisfactions. Everyday life goes on much the same, regardless; and life was good on the Rancho Los Feliz. Plenty for everybody—food, warmth, sunshine, and good cheer. And love, too, for the master of the Rancho. . . as soon as he saw Maria.

The Senorita Maria del Rosario Villa was truly a beauty. Her dark eyes danced, her supple young body tantalized. Ah, a schemer she was, too, and a vixen; but nobody had the courage to inform Domingo of Maria's faults.

Words of properly restrained affection were whispered, according to the custom. And finally, "Maria, will—will you be my wife?" Domingo, feverish with hope, waited for her answer.

Maria nodded, veiling her eyes and smiling a strange smile.

DOMINGO and Maria were married amid the resounding cheers of the countryside. A jubilant gathering of guests celebrated the wedding with days of dancing, singing, fete and festival. Maria was unpredictable, yes—perhaps now she would settle down a bit?

Maria's eyes—as the days passed—did not come to rest fondly on her husband as he strode through the courtyard. Maria watched the hills and the horizon, and pouted. Domingo sighed and hid his disappointment.

One warm afternoon a drifting vaquero, or cowboy, rode by the Rancho. The glum young wife's face lit with a smile more gay than any she had given her husband Domingo. Her songs became breathless and impudent as she watched the vaquero swaggering about the village. Her step was light once again—and fast! She ran away with her dashing vaquero, a lad named Alipas, leaving behind her home, husband, honor—everything. All for a flashing smile, the wink of an eye, the careless shrug of a shoulder.

And the "Happy Ranch" was desolate. Domingo, so openly shamed before all men, went about white-lipped. His fierce pride agonized. But Maria was, at least, still legally his wife; he had promised to love her, and love her he did, even now! His love was stronger than pride or shame or bitterness. Word came to Domingo of the whereabouts of the erring couple; he sent a message begging Maria to come home. She refused, arrogantly.

Then a representative of the Church sought her out and had a long, quiet talk with her. Maria seemed thoughtful and repentant. She agreed to come home, if—if Domingo himself would come after her. And of course, Domingo would!

Down the Los Feliz trail he rode, on a great prancing horse. This time—surely this time happiness would be his! Everything forgiven and forgotten . . . a fresh start. . . a new life together. Gently he mounted Maria behind him. Feeling her close again, he was anxious to please, anxious to show her his su-

perb skill in handling a skittish horse. Maria—meek, very sweet—smiled her strange smile. They raced homeward.

The Los Feliz was a pleasant trail, and a lonely one. At a turn on the road a "bandit" leaped out from behind a boulder. The horse reared and plunged. Maria promptly slid down, exposing Domingo's back to the killer as a perfect target; the knife flashed and sank deep. Domingo's last thought before he entered eternity must have been the sad realization that Maria, his lovely dark-eyed bride, had tricked him to his doom.

Maria and the "bandit"—her vaquero, Alipas—hurriedly dragged the body away into thick brush and covered it with leaves. They rode away together. Five days later, passing travelers discovered the wretched remains of Domingo.

MARIA AND Alipas did not have long to gloat over their brutal crime. They were very promptly found and arrested and brought to Los Angeles. A week passed; seven slow days. Indignation flared among friends and acquaintances of the respected rancher Domingo. Was justice to wait, to hesitate now? No! No! they thundered.

Fifty men met; tempers flamed at the delay of the authorities. Westerners were quick to befriend strangers, and quick to despise treachery. Now the fifty men felt the time for talk was done—it was time to act! They marched to the jail. Let it be remembered, in their behalf, that they took the law into their own hands solely because there was then no firmly constituted government. Authority and laws had been hopelessy shifted about and tangled during the frequent revolts. So the jail was surrounded by neighbors of Domingo; they demanded entry.

The jailor, refusing to hand over his keys, stood helpless as they were taken from him. Doors opened, ropes whipped out, two murderers were pronounced to deserve death, and hanged...high in the sunshine. There they swayed, together, on view in front of the jail for two hours before they were cut down and taken away. A lesson, plain to see, for other would-be bandits, betrayers, and killers. A very grim warning indeed! The self-styled citizens' committee then quietly disbanded.

Today Los Feliz is an important boulevard in a great city; its traffic hurries back and forth, busy with modern living. There is no room for three tragic ghosts of long ago to ride again, searching vainly for happiness!

★

3 SUSPENSEFUL MYSTERIES

FATAL WEDDING
by Frederick C. Davis

THE NEIGHBOR
by Randall Garrett

ASHES TO ASHES
by Richard Deming

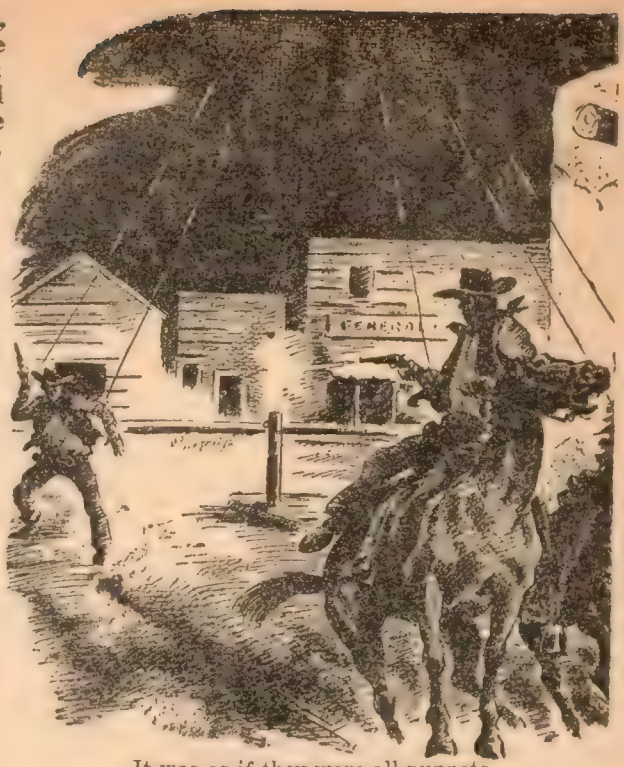
leads off the big 5th pocket-size issue of

DOUBLE ACTION DETECTIVE STORIES

For more than twenty years, Westhuysen had upheld the law in a peaceful town; now there was trouble. And now, for the first time, he might have to kill a man...

FIRST KILL

by ROBERT SILVERBERG



It was as if they were all puppets.

MARSHAL WESTHUYSEN was a quiet man with gray hair and gray eyes, and he had been in Apple Creek for more than twenty years. He carried a pair of well-oiled single-action Colts in his holsters, and his cartridge belt was always full.

Always. Because Westhuysen hardly ever fired those shiny Colts, and in more than twenty years he'd never killed a man. He hadn't needed to—not till the day Boon Thornton showed up in Apple Creek, and let it be known that he was in town for the sole purpose of robbing the local bank.

"What you aimin' to do about Thornton, Marshal?" someone asked him as he entered Ledyard's Drygoods.

Westhuysen turned and saw Slim Harker of the Lazy B standing near the back counter by a stack of Levis. The Marshal frowned. "Your business?"

"Nope," the cowhand said amiably. "Just curious. I heard Thornton's campin' out in an old prospector's shack down near the fork in the river. Thought I'd pass the word along, that's all. You sore, Marshal?"

Westhuysen fingered his star nervously. "Not really. Thornton's still hangin' around down here, eh?"

"He's been in Apple Creek a week," Harker said. He picked up a pair of Levis and ran his fingers approvingly over their stiff blue material. "Good stuff," the cowhand said. "I'll take a pair, Mr. Ledyard."

He dropped a coin on the counter, threw the jeans over his arm, nodded at the Marshal, and left. Westhuysen glanced at the drygoods man.

"What does that cowhand want out of me?" he asked irritably. "He want me to go out there and shoot down Thornton in cold blood? Thornton

hasn't done anything yet, you know!"

Ledyard was a small, withered-looking man with a large nose. He smiled solemnly. "Not *yet,* Marshal. But you know and I know what Boon Thorton's business is in Apple Creek. And you and me and Slim Harker all have money in the bank here, Marshal. Slim's just interested in seein' that it stays there."

"Yeah," Westhuysen said heavily. "The money'll stay there; don't you worry about that. How you fixed for tan leather vests?"

"Got just the thing you need," Ledyard said.

WHEN HE was finished shopping, Marshal Westhuysen stopped off at the bank to draw out a little cash, then went on home. It was a hot, dry day; his widebrimmed hat was sticky with perspiration around the headband. The town of Apple Creek moved about its business slowly, half-asleep. Westhuysen nodded politely to the old cowhands sleeping in the shade on the porch of the Livery, picked up his horse, and struck out for home at a quick canter.

Westhuysen lived in a small adobe about half a mile out of town. He had lived alone, ever since his wife died some ten years back, and ordinarily he spent most of the day from dawn to sunset in his office in Apple Creek. Not today, though. It wasn't much past noon, but he was on his way back home to think things out.

It was twenty-two years since he'd first become Marshal of Apple Creek, which had long since become a sleepy little town, where there was little trouble. Year had stretched into year; the West was quieting down, all around. Trouble had stayed away from the little town. Rampaging Indians? Didn't come within a hundred miles. Drunken railwaymen? Not a sign. Outlaws? Gamblers? Big-time cattle bosses? *Not a one,* Westhuysen thought. *It's been peaceful here. Too damn peaceful.*

He was fifty-three, and he'd never killed a man. Never so much as wounded one. Hadn't had the chance, that was all; the situation never arose.

I'll bet I'm the only sheriff in ten states who can say that. Twenty-two years of uninterrupted stagnation. And now it's all over.

He reached his place and reined in his starfaced nag at the rail outside. He stood there for a couple of minutes in the hot sun, one hand on the horse's quivering flank, the other clutching the bundles he'd brought home from the stores. A trickle of sweat rolled down out of his hat and dribbled into his eyes. He shook his head like a cow flicking away flies.

"Damnation," he said out loud. Boon Thornton was here to rob the Apple Creek Bank. After all these years, trouble had finally caught up with Apple Creek.

Westhuysen's fingers shook nervously. He was starting to feel the net of pressure tighten around him. Twenty-two years; too damned much peace.

He stared straight ahead, facing the crushing fact that if Boon Thornton wanted to ride in and clean out the bank that afternoon, there wasn't a thing Avery Westhuysen could do about it.

He took his hand off the horse and let it rest on the thick black butt of his Colt. He knew he could never shoot down Boon Thornton.

I ain't never killed, he thought. *And I'm just too plumb old to start learnin' how now.*

"Might as well go inside," he said out loud. He hunched his shoulders up straight and pushed open the door of his place.

HE GOT INSIDE and had to adjust his eyes to the dimness. While he stood there, blinking, someone came out of the shadows. "Hello, Avery."

The voice was deep, rich, melodic,

and strangely familiar. "Who the hell are you?" Westhuysen demanded. "What are you doing in my house?"

"Just came to visit," the stranger said. Westhuysen narrowed his eyes, focussed them on the newcomer. He was tall, with wide-set, piercing eyes surrounded by a network of little crinkles. Under the lowslung sombrero, it was possible to see iron-gray hair. The man's nose was an impressive hook, and his mouth a thin, fleshless line.

"Don't you remember me, Avery?"

Westhuysen put his bundles down and pushed back his hat. "You—you ain't Jim Pawley, are you?"

The thin lips spread in a slow grin. "Forgot me so soon, Avery? Sure, I'm Jim Pawley. Your old buddy from the Swinging M. Shame, to think you'd have to figure so hard before you pulled out my name."

"I reckon it's been near twenty-five years, Jim." Westhuysen's voice was harsh and choked. "Twenty-five years since we rode cattle together. Maybe more."

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Pawley sat down in Westhuysen's favorite chair and crossed his long legs.

"What brings you back here? How come you wandered in like this, Jim?"

Pawley shrugged. "Just—just came, that's all. I was with a ranch down Texas way, but it dried up and blew away. So I'm here. I got here this morning about ten, and you weren't home, so I figured I'd mosey in and wait. You're not annoyed, are you?"

Westhuysen shook his head. Then his eyes narrowed again. "If you came in today, where's your horse?"

The crinkles around Pawley's eyes deepened. "Done left him in Texas, I guess. Hitched a way overland with a stage, got through Indian country on the back of an old mule, made it here on shanks's mare."

The Marshal's eyes drifted to the worn soles of Pawley's boots. "Reckon you had a rough trip," he said. "I allow you must be good and tired."

"A mite," Pawley admitted.

Westhuysen let himself drop into a frame chair nearby. "So am I," he said. Having Pawley, this ghost out of a nearly-forgotten youth, show up again made the Marshal feel terribly old, old and tired. *The desert sun's dried out my head,* Westhuysen thought bleakly.

"You feeling all right, Avery?"

He lifted his head. "A little pooped, that's all. Had a long day's work yesterday. But I guess I got no call being tired next to you—what I been doing ain't nothin' next to hitching it here from Texas!"

"I came here for a reason," Pawley said softly. "You're a solid man in these parts, Avery. Since the ranch down there busted up, I been having trouble. I—"

"Thought I could do something for you," Westhuysen completed. He shook his head sadly. "I'd like to, Jim. But I don't know how much my word's gonna count for around here after the next couple days. I think I'm heading to get ridden out of here on a rail."

Pawley glanced up sharply. "What's the matter, Avery?"

"I shouldn't be burdening you with all this," Westhuysen said. "It sounds silly." He leaned forward and grasped Pawley's tanned arm. "Jim, if you let a word of what I'm going to tell you get past you, I'll—I'll—"

Kill you? Westhuysen choked off the meaningless words.

"Well, I'll be sore."

"I'll keep it quiet," Pawley said. "What's eatin' you?"

"There's a bank robber scoutin' around here," Westhuysen said. "He's been hangin' around down by the river near a week, just bidin' his time. One of these days he's gonna walk in and bust open Mr. Adams' bank, here in town."

"So? Get men out there, or guard it

yourself. Let the bustard have it the second he shows his snout near the bank."

Westhuysen held up a couple of fingers. "Sounds easy, but it ain't so." He turned agonized eyes on the other man. "Jim—*I cain't fire my gun!*"

"You *what?*"

"You heared me. All these years I've nary been in a gunfight once. And now I'm an old man, and I can't do it nohow."

It felt good to get it off his chest, to tell someone else about the strange weakness that afflicted the Marshal of Apple Creek. Westhuysen let the words spill out of his mouth and sat there waiting for Pawley to start laughing at him.

BUT PAWLEY didn't laugh. His slow smile became a frown, and there was a look of deep concern in his eyes when he turned to Westhuysen.

"Funny thing," he said. "You know, when I headed out of Texas and up here I was in a lousy way, wondered what good I was alive. So I come up here, figuring you could give me a hand. Then I get here and find out you're worse off than I am!"

"Don't rub it in," Westhuysen said quietly.

"I'm not; I'm just philosophizing. You say you can't shoot? Have you tried?"

"Nope. No sense in it. I know I could have Thornton walk right in and out of the bank under my nose, and I couldn't do a thing to him."

"What about your deputies?"

"Two deadheads, but I guess they could manage. Except that this sort of thing is supposed to be a Marshal's job. I couldn't assign them to guard the bank while I crawfished out."

Pawley frowned. "You could say you were sick or something, couldn't you?"

"Uh-uh. That would work this time —but what about the next? Word would get around that the Marshal of Apple Creek didn't care what happened in his town, and then we'd be the biggest sin city in Nevada. No thanks."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Let Thornton rob the bank; then I'm going to quit. I don't deserve the job anyway."

Pawley's deep-set eyes glinted. "Don't do it, Avery! Don't quit!"

"Why not?"

"I've got a better idea. Appoint *me* your chief deputy. I need a job of some kind, anyway. We could work as a team, the way we did in the old days on the swinging M. When Thornton tries the bank, *I'll* plug him. No one'll be the wiser, and we'll both have paying jobs."

"I don't like it," Westhuysen said flatly.

"Don't be silly, Avery. Where would you go from here?"

Pawley's words sank in like red-hot branding irons. *Where would you go from here?* No place. He was too old to punch cows, too old to start farming, too old to ride coach. And if he left Apple Creek, no other town would want a gunless lawman. He was alone and he was pinned down here. If he gave up his job, he'd just have to join the sleepy grifters who lolled in front of the Livery, sliding into old age and waiting for death.

He nodded. "Okay, Jim; it's a deal. You're my new chief deputy—and we work as a team!"

WESTHUYSEN pushed open the batwings of the *Golden Fleece* and stood in the doorway of the saloon, looking around. The usual early-evening crowd of barflies was there, the cowhands from the surrounding cattle country, a couple of chubby Mexicans, some of the townsfolk. Just a quiet night in a quiet town.

There was a new light in Westhuysen's eyes, though. All the troubles, the

nagging self-accusation of cowardice, had cleared away. He was *still* gun-shy, and there was no getting away from it; but now no one would find out. No one knew but Pawley, and Pawley would keep quiet. Together, they would handle Boon Thornton.

"Quiet for a second!" Westhuysen yelled, and the bar-noises quieted down.

"Evening, Marshal!" the barkeep said pleasantly.

Westhuysen gestured at Pawley, standing to his side. "Fellows, this is Jim Pawley! He's an old pal of mine from my ranching days, and he's the new chief deputy in Apple Creek!"

Pawley stepped forward. "I'm sure glad to be here," he said. "Marshal Westhuysen's been telling me what a good place to live Apple Creek is, and I'm aimin' to help him keep it that way."

"Let's have a round of drinks," Westhuysen said. "One on the law for everyone here!"

There was a general reaction of jubilation, but Westhuysen sensed something in the air that made him feel uneasy and depressed. He caught the sour eye of Colman, his lunkheaded deputy, and heard someone else murmur words to the effect that Marshal Westhuysen just didn't have the guts to stand up to Thornton, and had to call in an old pal of his to wield the trigger hand.

It was true, but they had no business pointing it out. Why the hell did they care? Why, Westhuysen asked himself bitterly, why can't they leave things alone?

He'd served Apple Creek faithfully for twenty-two years. And now they didn't care a damn for him. They—

Westhuysen's thoughts became blurred in a torrent of self-pity. Right down at the bottom of it all, burning like a cold hard flame, was the undeniable realization that he wasn't getting any raw deal; he didn't deserve pity. He wasn't fit to serve any more, and he'd be doing the right thing if he quit.

He stiffened. *I'm not quitting,* he told himself firmly. *No matter what they say about me, I won't quit.*

At his side, Pawley grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, Avery, drink up! Stop glooming around like an old gelding put out to pasture!"

Westhuysen tried to match his old pal's grin, but the attempt wasn't a success. He put away his drink, and moodily called for another.

A half hour passed. Something in Westhuysen's mind—the same thing, maybe, that told him he could never shoot a man down—told him that tonight was the night Boon Thornton was going to make his jump on the Apple Creek bank. There was something heavy in the air, something hanging that told Westhuysen tonight was the night.

Tonight.

THERE WAS just a fraction of a moon in the sky, glimmering palely in the blackness. The evening air was cool and a faint breeze whispered through the town as Westhuysen and Pawley strolled slowly down the wide dirt street that was the heart of Apple Creek.

"You think it's tonight, eh?" Pawley asked.

Westhuysen nodded. "I'm sure of it. He's been here near a week; it's time for him to make his move."

"How you feel about it?"

"Cold. Cold and chilly. You know how it is."

Pawley nodded. "Don't worry, Avery. I'll be right there next to you when it happens." He glanced upward. "Getting late. Want to turn in?"

Westhuysen shook his head doggedly. "Thornton's coming after the bank tonight; I'll wait."

"If you say so," Pawley sighed.

"I'd sorta like to get some sleep, though."

There was the distant sound of hooves, and the two men stiffened. A frightened brush rabbit scampered out of a clump of straggly boomweed and raced down the street, but no one appeared.

"False alarm," Pawley said; "Thornton ain't gonna come tonight, Avery!"

"I say he is," the Marshal repeated firmly.

"Okay, then, let's get ready for him; go get your horse and we'll saddle him down by the bank."

"What for?"

"Just in case Thornton gets in and out of there in a hurry. You don't want him to get away without at least a chase, do you?"

"How about a horse for you?"

Pawley smiled apologetically. "That horse *is* for me. There ain't no sense *you* going after him, is there? I mean —well, you understand."

"Yeah; I understand. Okay, let's hitch my horse up outside the bank. If Thornton comes out and gets away, you kin hop on it and go after him, and I'll go home and play some solitaire. I'm gittin' real good at solitaire."

"Don't talk that way," Pawley said; "it's bad for you."

"I know," said Westhuysen. "Dammit, I know!"

They unhitched Westhuysen's starfacer from the post down at the *Golden Fleece* and walked the horse up the street to the rail outside the bank. Westhuysen tied the animal with a quick wrap hitch and walked away, staring moodily into the dark bank.

He could almost see the bandit from Arizona moving swiftly and efficiently around in there, cleaning out the safes, stuffing his saddlebags with gold and banknotes, riding a dusty trail down the middle of the street to safety. That was the way it would have been, before Pawley came.

Now, Pawley was here; Westhuysen felt safe, protected, grateful to Pawley the way ordinary townspeople usually feel grateful to a tough, competent Marshal. But behind the gratitude was a deep sense of inferiority and guilt that rubbed over Westhuysen's raw nerves like off-key fiddle notes.

"It's getting towards three in the morning," Pawley said. "Let's sit down and wait for your robber."

THEY SWUNG themselves down on the wooden planks outside the bank, and stretched their legs out in front of them. Westhuysen's holster clinked against the porch as he sat down, and a corner of his mouth scowled at the reminder of the useless guns at his sides.

He huddled together in his thick sheephide jacket as the night breeze blew coldly down. The minutes moved slowly by and Westhuysen took no notice of them. After a while, his eyes closed despite himself. He tried to pull their heavy-weighted lids up, but couldn't manage it, and slowly slipped into a doze.

Sometime later, he felt a sharp nudge in the ribs. He came awake in a hurry. It was past four.

"Avery!" came Pawley's harsh whisper. "Wake up!"

"What's happening?"

"Listen!"

There was the far-off drumbeat of hooves, slackening off after a minute or two into a more cautious trot and then finally almost a walk. Someone was coming.

"You think it's Thornton?" Westhuysen asked.

"Who else, at this hour? Come on—let's get around back and wait for him."

They hurriedly quitted the porch and ran behind the bank, taking positions down near the foundation of the building, where they could see the interior but couldn't be seen. "Let's wait here," Pawley said.

They heard footsteps a little while later.

"It's Thornton!" Westhuysen said.

Pawley nodded tensely. "Just wait," he said. "Wait till he gets inside."

Seconds ticked by. Westhuysen heard Thornton forcing the lock on the bank, slicing through the metal, going inside. His legs stiffened. The long-awaited bank robbery was taking place this very minute. A hard-faced tough from Arizona was cleaning out the savings of the people of Apple Creek.

And yet—Westhuysen knew he couldn't go inside and shoot Thornton the way he deserved. He just couldn't take another man's life, even if he was robbing the bank. What did money matter, against a man's life? He began to tremble.

At his side, Pawley seemed deadly cool. He was poised, ready, his gun prepared to spring from its holster at a moment's notice.

"Give him time," Pawley said. "Let him get everything packed up nicely. Let's catch him with the goods on him—and mow him down the way he deserves."

"No!" It was a cry of despair.

"Let me do it my way," said Pawley. He squinted upward to see what the bandit was doing. "He's finishing up, now; his saddlebags are all packed."

"How much longer are we going to wait?" Westhuysen felt like a woman, waiting for Pawley to make the decisions even though he, Westhuysen, wore the badge. Sweat began to pour down his back, soaking his shirt. As the night air got to the wet shirt, he shivered lightly.

"Okay," Pawley said. "Let's go get him!"

THEY GOT to their feet and circled warily around the bank building, looking for a point of approach. Pawley glanced in the window.

"He's busy tying up his saddlebags," he said; "we can go in the front way and he'll never know what hit him!"

They clambered up the porch. Westhuysen saw the robber bent over a bulging saddlebag, ignoring the front of the bank.

Why, he's just a kid, the Marshal thought suddenly. Thornton's shoulders were narrow and sloping, his back thin, his legs wiry and long. *Just a kid.* Standing in there, robbing the bank.

Suddenly, Pawley pushed open the door. "Hello, Thornton!" he said loudly.

The bandit whirled and a gun glinted in his hand. A bright flash of flame speared through the dusk and the gun dropped. Thornton mouthed a curse and Pawley's second bullet penetrated his forehead. The bank-robber dropped and crumpled into a limp little heap at the foot of the cashier's desk.

"He's dead," Westhuysen said. His throat was dry and the words came out half-whispered. "You killed him."

"Yeah," Pawley said. "There was nothing else I could do; it was self-defense." His voice was rough and harsh suddenly, without its former melodiousness.

"You know better, Jim. That kid never stood a chance."

Pawley chuckled. "If I hadn't done it, the jury would have. Saves the county some money this way."

Then he turned to Westhuysen. "I want to thank you, Avery."

"What for?"

"For putting all this money in my pocket," Pawley said. He smiled, almost apologetically, and said, "I need it real bad. I owe near eight thousand down in Texas."

"You—"

Pawley's fist crashed into Westhuysen's jaw, and the old Marshal reeled back, stumbling into the cashier's desk. His boot came down on the dead man's hand, and he recoiled, gagging.

Dizzily, he looked around for Pawley. He saw the other man—finishing the job of tying the saddlebags, scoop-

ing up the money-laden leather, carrying it outside and throwing it over the lean back of Westhuysen's horse.

"So long, Avery," Pawley said, and began to unhitch the horse.

Suddenly, Westhuysen saw the whole thing, and tears of rage and shame came to his eyes. Pawley had played him for a sucker! Here to borrow money, he'd found a simpler way by becoming Westhuysen's deputy. Pawley had figured it real well. As gunhand for the gutless Marshal, he'd come out here to guard the bank against Thornton. Then he'd knocked Thornton off and proceeded to rob the bank himself, knowing well that Westhuysen wouldn't dare lift a finger against him.

Westhuysen stood there on the porch of the bank, watching Pawley spur the horse and start off down the street. A kaleidoscope of thoughts and emotions whirled through him.

Thornton had been a stranger, just a cheap thief, and Westhuysen had known he couldn't shoot him. But Pawley? An old friend, a man he'd shared beans and bacon with out on the range, a man he'd regarded as a brother—

Pawley had betrayed him. That was different.

WESTHUYSEN'S jaw tightened and suddenly there was the unfamiliar feel of a gunbutt in his hand. He lifted it and squeezed the cold trigger, once.

Crack!

Aboard the galloping horse, Pawley turned. Westhuysen saw Pawley's face —the face of a man who'd just had his deepest faith shaken. Pawley had been absolutely certain Westhuysen wouldn't fire. Now, he looked vindictive, almost accusing, as blood welled from his side.

Westhuysen smiled. *That's the way I ought to be looking,* he thought. *As if I'd been swindled. Poor swindled Pawley.* He fired again, and Pawley toppled from the horse and lay still in a patch of blood-soaked dust. With calm deliberation, Westhuysen holstered his smoking gun and began to walk toward the dying man, knowing he'd earned the right to keep his job.

★

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REAL WESTERN STORIES

The big man claimed he was the dreaded Club Charley — and did it matter whether he was or not? He had a gun on Jack and Lu, and it was plain that the husband would be killed first . . .

BANDIT'S PREY

BY J. J. MATHEWS

ALL THAT was known of Club Charley were vague descriptions by people who had seen him in action. He had bushy black hair and during the holdups in which he figured he always wore a black bandanna over the lower part of his face.

After his nickname—"Club Charley"—became widely known, he got in the habit of leaving a card, the ace of spades, wherever he committed a robbery, apparently to signify that he was proud of his work, wanted no one else to take credit for it.

One day the little newspaper at the West Texas mining town of Quintana carried a startling headline:

DESPERADO ROBS QUINTANA BANK

$5,000 Offered For Club Charley Dead or Alive

" 'Club Charley' left his calling card last night at the Quintana Bank. The safe was pried open, and six thousand dollars in gold and $4,500 in currency are missing. A reward of $5,000 is offered by bank officials for the criminal's capture, dead or alive. Sheriff Joe Barton got three posses under way this morning. He promises this will be the last time Club Charley has use for his visiting card in Texas. . ."

On the same day two travelers galloped to the top of a knoll in the foothills of the Davis Mountains, reined in their horses, covered like themselves with a coating of alkali dust. Before them lay a long desert stretch—and at the end their destination—El Paso.

The yellow rays of the sinking sun lit up the faces of a man and a woman. His was bronzed by exposure, the shade of burnished leather—and as tough. Hers was gentler, and in her wide blue eyes lurked something akin to fright.

The man pointed off across the plain where scraggly mesquite trees

stood like silent, grotesque sentinels. Half a mile below the knoll stood a shack where they could find shelter for the night.

As they rode across the intervening distance the sun slipped out of sight and a night wind, rising suddenly, sent little puffs of sand rolling over their path. The chill of the southwestern night was in the air and the brief twilight had almost passed by the time the man had tied the horses and returned to the door of the shack.

The woman had not yet gone in. "Jack. . .look!"

There was a placard tacked to the door. Sheriff Barton or his men had apparently been there. It offered $5,000 for the capture of Club Charley, dead or alive.

The man merely glanced at it. "Let's go in," he said.

"I'm afraid, Jack. Let's ride on. The horses aren't tired."

"Nothin' to be afraid of, Lu. Haven't I always taken care of you? Let's stop awhile. I'm hankerin' for some beans and bacon."

He lit two lanterns that hung from the rafters, then started a fire in a small, badly rusted stove. Thick slabs of bacon were sizzling before Lu spoke again.

"How long will it take us to reach El Paso?"

"Oh, seven or eight hours, mebbe—then up the valley into New Mexico." He added: "Serve that bacon, will you?"

He brought two boxes to the rude table. Lu brought on the bacon and beans and poured steaming coffee into two tin cups. They sat down to eat.

SHE SAID suddenly, "I've been dreaming so long of that little orchard, Jack, that I'm afraid of everything. I'll be afraid until we ride into that valley."

"I ain't goin' to let anything stop us from gettin' there."

He patted her hand awkwardly. Friendly little wrinkles creased the corners of his eyes. She smiled, her eyes moist. But the smile froze as the sound of hoofbeats reached their ears.

The man arose, went quickly to the door. Lu stood close beside him. It swung open and a stranger strode in. A great hulk of a man, broad-shouldered, his open flannel shirt revealing a bulging, hairy chest. He was hatless and his bushy black hair was flecked with dust. Two guns hung in holsters from his belt.

"I'm hungry, friends," he said in a hoarse voice.

Jack jerked his thumb toward the table. "Fall to, then." He nodded to Lu who went to the stove to prepare another plate of food. As the newcomer crossed the room he kept glancing at Lu, as though her shapely figure intrigued him.

He asked, "Where you folks headin'?"

Jack shrugged. "North, I reckon."

"Where you from?"

"Back east a ways."

"You ain't very sociable, partner. Queer thing about me, I allus insist on strangers bein' friendly. It's mighty unhealthy to be anything else in Texas."

Jack said, "I ain't aimin' to linger long in Texas."

The big man grinned maliciously. As Lu set a platter of beans before him he reached out, grasped her arm and pulled her toward him. She pulled back as she saw Jack's hand go swiftly to his belt—saw, too, that the stranger's free hand rested on the butt of one of his pistols.

"Jack!" Her voice stayed Jack's action. His body relaxed. He looked at Lu, smiled reassuringly. The smile did not change when he found himself gazing into the muzzle of the stranger's gun.

"Keep your hands off your iron and be keerful," warned the big man. "I reckon you better hand over your hardware—butt first!"

Jack held his gun by the barrel, laid it on the table.

Lu made a step toward the stranger.

"Stand back, lady. And you, partner, stand up and hold your hands behind you."

Deftly the big man looped the end of a short lariat he had brought with him and tightened it about Jack's wrists. The woman stood helpless, trembling. The stranger watched her out of the corner of his eye. He laughed now as he pushed Jack toward the door.

"Seein' you ain't at all sociable, mebbe me and the lady can get better acquainted if you're outside."

Jack grated, "She happens to be my wife!"

"Waal—I ain't intendin' to marry her." The big man laughed loudly as he swung back the door.

It was black night outside. No moon. But the sound of the wind was heard as it swept with a low, mournful whistle through the scrub.

The stranger thumped the placard on the door with his fist. "Ever hear o' Club Charley?" He laughed harshly. "Well, I'm Club Charley! You can be readin' this and amusin' the coyotes while I'm entertainin' the lady. In the mornin' I'm headin' out."

Swiftly but firmly he bound Jack on the outside, his back to the door directly beside the placard, winding the lariat completely around the door by thrusting it through the crevices at the hinges. It held Jack helpless.

As the confessed bandit started to close the door, Lu, with a cry, sprang toward Jack, trying to put her arms around him. With an oath the big man dragged her away, back into the room.

"I'll be watchin' the rope, in case you're expectin' to pry loose," he said to Jack.

LU, NEAR the table, watched the door close. Then the big man was beside her, setting a flask on the table. He took Jack's revolver, then both his own, emptied the chambers, thrusting the shells into his pocket.

"Women can't be trusted too far," he leered.

Lu had quickly gathered her wits, one thought uppermost. From the flask she poured liquor into the two tin cups. The big man laughed. "If you're expectin' me to drink heavy, lady, I'm sure disappointin' you."

But he gulped the first drink. His beady eyes glistened as he pawed at Lu. For a while she struggled desperately. But within the tiny room there was no place to run. Each time she wrenched herself free it only inflamed him more. Finally he caught her in his arms in a corner where the mattress lay.

She was half-facing the door. Suddenly her frenzied pleadings ceased. Her struggles ended. A glad cry burst from her throat.

The big man turned swiftly toward the door. His face became a livid, earthly yellow. Two words in guttural tones issued from his lips.

"God A'mighty!"

There was the flash of a hurtling form, the crash of two bodies falling heavily to the floor. Then iron fingers encircled the throat of the big man and pressed with unrelenting strength.

Two days later Sheriff Joe Barton and a posse came to the shack. They found the body sprawled upon the mattress, death agony frozen on its features. Beside the body was a knife, stuck through the ace of spades, pinning to the floor the placard which had been ripped from the door.

And on the back of the placard was

something written in a sprawling hand:

This coyoty who claimed to be me is the first man I ever killed —and that's God's truth! You won't believe I had to do it in self-defense, but I did. It's lucky I learnt how to get out of a rope. So long, sheriff. I'm travelin' on with my wife. I'll try and be a good boy from now on.

P. S. Seein' Club Charley is gone I took the reward from this coyoty. Where he's gone he won't have no more use for his poke.

★

THE KILLING OF YELLOW HAND

Special Feature

by CARL W. BREIHAN

There seems to be some doubt whether Buffalo Bill did kill Yellow Hair, in single combat, as legend relates.

THE "RECORD OF EVENTS" from the files of the War Department reports of the Fifty Cavalry by Colonel Merritt:

"Had an engagement with party of about 45 Indians on July 17th, 1876, near Indian Creek—killing one Indian. No casualties in the regiment. Followed the Indians toward the Red Cloud Reservation. About twenty-five miles from that Agency, the trail of a very large body of Indians was struck where they had turned back (being evidently appraised of our approach by runners from the party attacked in the morning) towards the Agency at Red Cloud; the trail was followed to within a short distance of the Agency where it turned off the Reservation toward the Spotted Tail Agency. This movement prevented many hundred warriors from joining the hostiles in the northern country. The command arrived and encamped at Red Cloud on the night of July 17th, 1876."

The record quoted here, as well as the statements of Chris Madsen, Captain King, and Colonel Merritt, are now in the museum at Buffalo Bill's grave on Lookout Mountain, near Golden, Colorado. When you go there you may see Yellow Hand's scalp and the knife with which it was taken. On the scene of the duel, located by Captain King, Chris Madsen, and others, there stands a monument, with the following inscription:

ON THIS SPOT
BUFFALO BILL

KILLED
YELLOW HAIR
THE
CHEYENNE LEADER, WHO WITH A PARTY OF WARRIORS, DASHED DOWN THIS RAVINE TO WAYLAY TWO SOLDIERS COMING FROM THE WEST JULY 17, 1876

There can be no doubt that Buffalo Bill scalped Yellow Hand. The duel as "as plucky as single combat on both sides as is ever witnessed" in the words of Captain Charles King.

Who killed Yellow Hand?

Long after, a number of persons threw doubt upon this deed of Buffalo Bill, and declared that the Indian named Yellow Hand, or Yellow Hair, had been killed by someone else. The statements of Colonel Merritt, Captain King, and Chris Madsen, all agree in giving Cody the whole credit. Merritt, King, and Madsen are now dead, but they have left a record of what they saw.

On August 29, 1929, Chris Madsen made a sworn statement in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, describing what happened in the fight with Yellow Hand. "It was Cody who killed Yellow Hand," he declared in this statement, "and no other shots were fired so far as I could hear or see until the Indian was done for. I was close enough to see it all, and besides was practically out of the danger zone."

To W. C. Brown, U. S. retired, written at Guthrie, Oklahoma, Madsen wrote with regard to Cody's fight with Yellow Hand. "I was in a place where I had a good chance to have fired a shot at the Indian, but I was on duty to watch and report my observations and not to meddle with business of the troops operating under orders of their respective officers. So for that reason, I am about the only man who saw the fight who did not kill the Indian!"

And what is the opinion of the Indians? From Northern Cheyenne Agency, located at Lame Deer, Montana, comes another claimant to witnessing the killing of Yellow Hand. This is Beaver Heart, a member of the tribe of Northern Cheyennes, who fought the Fifty Cavalry at War Bonnet Creek on that July day of 1876, and a companion of Yellow Hand.

Beaver Heart says he was right there, and witnessed the entire scrimmage; that he doesn't know any white man named Buffalo Bill; that there was no duel between Yellow Hand and anybody from the Fifth Cavalry or elsewhere; that—but let the following correspondence speak for itself.

BEAVER HEART'S statement follows: "A band of Cheyennes (Little Wolf's band) were at the old Red Cloud Agency at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Shortly after the Custer battle on the Little Big Horn, we started to go home from Fort Robinson to the scene on War Bonnet or Hat Creek. After we made camp, Chief Little Wolf appointed three of us to go out and scout ahead in the direction we were traveling, to see if there were any soldiers near. The three appointed were myself (Beaver Heart), Buffalo Road and Yellow Hair (Hand). We scouted around all that night. Early in the morning, we were on a high bluff or hill; we looked down and saw two troops of United States cavalry. The soldiers were just saddling up and getting ready to leave. The bluffs we were on overlooked War Bonnet Creek, and the soldiers were camped on this creek.

"We immediately returned to the camp, reported that soldiers were near, and told where they were. I, and seven other warriors on horseback, started toward the soldiers. We saw a man on horseback riding back and forth upon the same ridge we had been on when first sighting the soldiers. We proceed-

ed toward this hill; the man we saw then disappeared and went down the other side. We started to climb the hill, and were almost on the top, when soldiers suddenly appeared at the top of the hill and began firing at us. We ran back toward the main body of Indians. The soldiers followed us and kept shooting as we retreated. Two of the warriors left us and started up the creek.

"Pretty soon my horse was hit; it fell dead, and I was afoot. The other five warriors left me and rode back to the main body of Indians. I was in rough country, and worked my way on foot toward the head of the soldiers, who were stretched over quite a bit of country. I thought that I could fight better and stand less chance of getting hit, if I was at the head of the soldiers. I was there firing at the soldiers with a sixshooter—as I had no rifle—and pretty soon Yellow Hair rode up to where I was and asked me how I was. He told me that we had to do some fighting to keep the soldiers away from the women and children. He then rode down the line of the soldiers away from me. The soldiers were firing at him all the time, but he reached the end of the line of soldiers before his horse was killed.

As the horse was killed, Yellow Hair jerked the bridle off the animal, took his war-bonnet off, and tucked it under his belt. He then started to walk away. The soldiers kept on firing; bullets were flying all around him, and he didn't go far before he was hit and fell dead.

After he was killed, the soldiers stopped firing; one soldier dismounted and went over where Yellow Hair lay. He reached down, got the war-bonnet and lifted it in the air and was shaking it. Then another man came up to where Yellow Hair lay, and sat down near his head. We were too far away to see what he was doing. The first man to reach the body was a sergeant—we could tell by the yellow stripes on his arms. The second man did not have any uniform on. Yellow Hair was scalped, but we did not know who had done it. Pretty soon we saw a fire blazing where Yellow Hair's body was, and the soldiers drew away...

"I want to say in conclusion that I do not know Buffalo Bill. I have heard the story as related by him regarding this fight, and that Yellow Hair challenged him. This is not true. Buffalo Bill, whoever he was, could not speak Cheyenne; and Yellow Hair could not talk English or Sioux. I do not know how those two people could talk to each other. Furthermore, Yellow Hair was not killed by any one man as far as I could see, as the whole of two troops of soldiers were firing at him. If Buffalo Bill was with those soldiers, he stayed with them until Yellow Hair was killed. He did not come out and engage Yellow Hair single-handed.

BEAVER HEART was 77 years old in 1929 when he made this statement. The interpretation was made by Willis Rowland, and it was told to Indian Superintendent C. B. Lohmiller on February 13, 1929.

Josie Tangleyellowhair, eighty-seven years old and a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe of Indians, a full sister of Yellow Hair or Hand, makes the following statement:

"The actual skirmish occurred some distance from the camp; and as the soldiers fired many shots, no one knew who killed my brother. An Indian by the name of White Horse was the one who informed me that Yellow Hair had been killed by the soldiers. According to the general opinion and talk of the Indians, Yellow Hair was killed by one of the bullets fired by the soldiers; he was not killed in single combat with Buffalo Bill..."

Shall we believe the old Cheyennes

[*Turn To Page* 67]

The Kilrain brothers had risked their lives for Pete Denham twice that day. Could he double-cross them now?

LONGRIDER'S GRATITUDE

by GLEN MONROE

THE SUN beat down on Pete Denham's dust-whitened, blond hair with a fierce, direct heat and he dropped in the saddle like a stalk of drought-wilted corn. His lathered bronc shuffled to a halt with its muzzle almost touching the ground. Denham opened his red-rimmed eyes and stared glassily at the precipitous drop before him, and the ranch that nestled below in the river-cleft green valley.

With a tremendous effort, he twisted in the saddle and studied the sky behind him. The dust cloud that had been following him mercilessly had split into two smaller ones. That meant the posse had divided and was trying to encircle him. His parched lips drew away from his teeth in a ghastly smile. They thought they had him, now. They had known about the valley and had steered him toward it for half a day, believing that he wouldn't dare try to descend the steep slope on a half dead bronc. And even if he did, he would make a fair target for their Winchesters, outlined against the unbroken green of the bottom lands.

Denham believed he was done for, but there was a streak of bull dog stubbornness in him that would never let him give up while he could stir a limb or crook a trigger-finger. All he wanted now was a place to put his back against and a chance to burn his last few cartridges in a snarling, fighting finish. They would never take him alive!

He slid to earth, clinging weakly to the pommel. With his clasp knife he sliced through the cinch. The kak and heavy saddle bags rolled to the ground, and he slapped the bronc's rump. It took a few steps, then halted, looking back at him out of mournful eyes. He began loading the last of his cartridges into his worn guns while he studied the twin dust clouds that were slowly converging on him. He realized bitterly that if he didn't find a place to hole up in soon, the posse would ring him and cut him down like a rabid coyote.

With one last grimace of hate, he started down the eroded slope, clawing and kicking holds in the treacherously soft soil. When he reached the bottom, after interminable heartbreaking effort, he could hear the distant rumble of hoof beats. That meant he

had a scant ten minutes left. He cursed feebly and sank to his knees. Even though every second was precious, he had to waste a few in resting. The landscape swam dizzily before his eyes as he looked desperately around for shelter. The ranch he had seen from the bluff loomed impossibly far ahead, but it was his only chance. When his breath had ceased tearing at his lungs, he lunged to his feet and weaved toward the buildings. Bitterness welled anew inside him as the oven-like heat quickly sapped his energy. He didn't mind dying, but what galled him was running like a weasel before a hound dog. He had always imagined himself going out with a blaze of gun glory in a shoot-out against insurmountable odds.

Above all, Pete Denham wanted men to respect and fear him despite his slight build. He wanted to do daring, breath-taking things that would make the world sit up and take notice. But what had happened just twenty-four hours previously in Shoatesville, had seemed neither daring nor breath-taking to him. His belly crawled when he remembered how Jud Halley and his bunch had gunned down the gray-haired station agent in cold blood. They had elected him to lead the posse off trail, and had agreed to meet him at a Muddy Spring saloon in ten days to split the take.

He was within a hundred feet of the ranch buildings now, but it might as well have been a hundred miles. His legs buckled under him like reeds. Tears of frustated rage welled from his eyes as he went down. Fate was even denying him the right to die standing on his two feet like a man. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps and tried desperately to drag a gun clear of leather, but a maddening flutter of weakness left him gasping helplessly. Merciful blackness flooded through his brain next, and he knew no more.

SHERIFF WYLIE dismounted before the Mule Shoe ranch house, but his possemen remained in the saddle, ready to ride. Kirk and Larry, the lanky, two-headed sons of old Doug Kilrain who owned the Mule Shoe spread, met the sheriff as he started up the veranda steps. The lawman looked from one to the other uncertainly, for the brothers were almost identical in appearance, despite the fact that Kirk was two years older than Larry.

"Howdy—uh—boys," Sheriff Wylie greeted them. "Is your dad home?"

"No. He's over to Cree Junction, seein' a buyer about our summer round-up," Kirk told him. "Somethin' we can do for you?"

Wylie's thin, sensitive face was sober as he continued. "We're lookin' for a pint-size gent who packs two murder guns. He an' some of his pards stuck up the Wells Fargo over in Shoatesville yesterday. They got away with a heap of foldin' money, an' they blew a hole big as your hat through poor old Eb Martin."

The brothers exchanged glances, and Kirk's tanned, square-jawed face hardened as he listened to the sheriff's words. "The yellow coyotes!" he growled, "I'd like to line my sights on a couple of them!"

"This fella you're chasin'. Are you dead sure he was in on the stick up?" Larry asked soberly.

"Bet your boots! We found his kak an' bags up on the bluff. The bags was stuffed with the stolen bills. Don't make no mistake about that little feller. If you see him, shoot to kill."

"We haven't seen the murderin' little runt," Kirk said savagely, "but if we run across him, we'll feed him to the buzzards a chunk at a time!"

Sheriff Wylie nodded in complete agreement. "We've got to be movin' on. Denham's afoot, so he can't get far. We found his horse a piece back where he turned him loose."

"He turned his horse loose?" Kirk echoed in surprise.

"Yup. Cut the rig off him so's he could graze. Poor critter was plumb done in, too."

The brothers watched the posse ride off, and when they were gone, it was Larry who broke the silence.

"Kirk," he said slowly, "a man who thinks of his horse with a posse hot on his trail can't be all bad. Any owl-hooter I've met would run his bronc dead into the ground before he'd pull rein."

Kirk shook his head doubtfully, "Maybe, but I've seen gents who'd shoot a man dead for spur curryin' a bronc, and at the same time gladly knife their best friend in the back for a plugged cartwheel."

"This fella Denham's different," Larry said, taking a deep breath. "You can see for yourself. He's hidin' in the smokehouse right this minute."

Kirk jumped as though he had been shot. "What!" he gasped, "an' you didn't turn him over to the posse!"

"Wait until you've seen him. There's somethin' about his looks that sort of makes you want to help him. It just didn't seem right to turn him over to the law without givin' him a chance. Anyhow, we've run down so many owl-hooters that I figure we're entitled to keep one for a pet if we want to."

The look of astonishment on Kirk's face slowly gave way to one of grim amusement.

"Reminds me of that time when we was kids an' you caught a catamount kitten. You wouldn't let him go till he et up one of Dad's best huntin' dogs. But let's have a look at your hoss-lovin' badman."

Together, they walked toward the smokehouse, which was a plank lined dugout sunk into the side of a hill-cock. Larry led the way, and it was he who rapped on the heavy, rough-hewn oak door. Kirk stood by him with his hands close to his cross-belted guns. There was no answer to Larry's knock.

"GUESS he hasn't come to yet," Larry explained calmly as he bent over and swung the door open. "He was out cold when I toted him in there."

Kirk palmed a gun and levelled it warily, focusing his eyes on the interior of the smoke house. Sunlight streamed through the open door and made a golden pool around Pete Denham's face where he lay on the dirt floor. His eyes were closed, and his haggered, boyish face bore an expression of utter bliss. Kirk slowly lowered his gun.

"Why he's just a kid!" he marvelled. "An' he's sleepin' like a baby. He must be worn to a frazzle to be sleepin' with the lawdogs yappin' at his tail."

"Well, do we turn him over to Sheriff Wylie?" Larry asked quietly.

Kirk stood for a long moment, looking down at Denham. Then he swept his hat off and scratched his head in bewilderment.

"He may be a mad dog, but he sure doesn't look like nothin' more than a very tired kid who's sick to death of runnin' away. I vote we try to make a useful citizen out of the little cuss!"

Pete Denham didn't awaken, even when they carried him into the ranch house and put him to bed in a spare room. The heart-breaking exertion of the past twenty-four hours had finally beaten down his bulldog will. Even the clamor of Sheriff Wylie's returning posse as they hoofed up to the house failed to rouse him. He stirred fretfully in his sleep when the baffled sheriff's voice reached his ears, but at no time did he really awake. Yet, as the hoofbeats of the posse receded into the distance, a faint, ironic smile touched his lips.

It was the fragrance of frying bacon that roused him next morning. He

hadn't eaten in almost two days, and his hunger amounted almost to agony. His eyes opened wide as his stomach began to perform disturbing acrobatics. He stared around, wideyed with astonishment while the memories of the past thirty-six hours galloped through his mind. Fear gripped him suddenly as he realized that his surroundings were completely strange. His hands clawed the cloth of his night shirt where his guns should have been, and his eyes rolled in terror until they located the heap of clothes piled on a chair by his bedside. Uppermost were his gunbelts. His hand jerked out frantically, and the wild thumping of his heart didn't subside until he had satisfied himself that both weapons were loaded.

When he had dressed, courage poured back into him as he felt the familiar weight of the holsters on his thighs. Gripping a ready gun, he followed the tantalizing smell of cooking food until he reached the huge ranch house kitchen. Two lanky young men were seated at a table, busily stowing away bacon and eggs of a quality and quantity that made his head spin. He clung to the door for support, and levelled his weapon.

Denham's eyes batted in amazement. He stood undecided, studying the brothers suspiciously. Finally he holstered his weapon with a sheepish grin.

"Could you-all spare some o' them rations? I'm powerful hungry."

"Sure, set up an' eat," Larry invited cordially. Kirk nodded a friendly greeting, and suddenly a hot blush of shame rose to Denham's face as he realized that these two strange young cowprods could have killed him in his sleep if they wanted to. He kept his eyes downcast as he pulled up a chair and began to attack the platter of breakfast Larry set before him. After he had finished eating, wonderingly, and not a little suspicious, Denham accepted the job the Kilrains offered him.

"We pay forty an' grub," Kirk said. "An' we expect you to work as hard as we do, but no harder."

"That's fair. Fairer'n I expected, considerin' certain facts," Denham said cautiously.

FOR THE next three days Pete Denham lived like one in a dream. The Kilrain brothers treated him like a friend and an equal—something which was baffling to him. To Denham, the world was made up of just two kinds of people; smart hombres who used their heads and their guns to win a living, and simple, dull plodders who sweated their lives away at hard labor. The Kilrains seemed to fall in the latter class.

Almost without realizing it, Denham's mind began to dwell on schemes for turning Kilrain's generosity to his own advantage. It was on the third day that he stumbled on what he considered a golden opportunity. He and Larry had been working since morning at cutting fancy breeding stock from the main body of the herd. These valuable animals were hazed one by one into a box draw until there was a bunch of about thirty head. Kirk rode guard on them, and Denham's eyes glittered with excitement as he figured their worth. He guessed they would bring close to five hundred apiece, even on an ask-no-questions market. And with only one guard, the prospects looked very bright indeed!

But he needed help, and he got it in a way that was surprising even to him, used as he was to ways of sudden violence.

The sun was balanced on the western horizon when Denham and Larry returned to the ranch that evening. Doug Kilrain, the brother's father and owner of the Mule Shoe spread was due to return from his business trip. They had decided that Larry should

meet him while Kirk rode guard on the costly blooded stock, the rest of the hands being busy with the main roundup.

It was when Denham and he were turning their mounts into the corral that Larry's eyes narrowed suddenly. There were three strange animals in the cavvy. That alone would not have alarmed him, for the Mule Shoe had frequent visitors, but the flanks of the strange cayuses were freshly brush-scarred as if they had been ridden hard through heavily wooded country. He said nothing to Denham, but he was keenly on the alert as they walked toward the ranch house.

He let Denham precede him through the door, and his hands were hooked in his cross shell belts, close to his twin, bone-handled guns. A stealthy step sounded behind him on the veranda as Denham went inside. He whirled with his hands diving toward gun butts. Then he froze like a statue. A gun muzzle almost touched his shirt front. Behind the gun loomed a squint-eyed, florid-faced giant with a week's growth of beard on his ugly face.

"Steady, feller," the stranger growled. "Hand over that hardware, an' do it careful!"

Another voice cracked out from inside the ranch house, and he realized that Denham was in the same predicament. Cautiously he lifted his weapons from their holsters and handed them over butt first.

"Git inside!" the stranger commanded.

He turned slowly. A lamp had been lit in the ranch house parlor, and by its light he saw three stony-faced men, all with drawn guns.

"Hello, Denham," Larry's captor said as he closed the door behind him. "We figured it was about time we had a little get-together. We've been hidin' out up in the hills, and sorta keepin' an eye on you."

"Hello, Halley," Pete Denham said sullenly. "I thought we was supposed to meet in ten days."

"Little change of plans. Hand over the take, Denham."

Denham's eyes widened in astonishment, then hot color flooded to his face. "You're loco as a grasshopper!" he snarled. "You have the take!"

"You have it, little boy!" Halley said, grinning wryly, "We figured one man had a better chance of gettin' away way with it than three, so we loaded it into your saddle bags before we split up. We tailed the posse while it was tailin' you, which was plenty smart on our part 'cause they didn't think of lookin' for us on their back trail."

"That's a lie!" Pete Denham blazed. "I never seen a dollar of—"

"He's tellin' the truth, Pete."

All eyes shifted to Larry's face, and he went on quietly, "Sheriff Wylie told me they found your saddle bags chock full of gold backs. Said you left 'em up on the bluff when you turned your bronc loose."

There was a moment of stunned silence as the outlaws digested Larry's words. Then Halley bellowed like a stuck pig. "You little fool! There was a cool two thousand in them saddle bags!"

MANIACAL fury contorted his visage. He lashed out with his boot heel. Denham gasped and sank to the floor clutching his middle. He aimed another kick at the young outlaw's face, but Larry intervened, moving quick as a catamount, balanced on his high-heel range boots. His fist exploded against Halley's jaw before he had time to swing his guns. Halley rocked back on his heels. Then before Larry could defend himself, a gun barrel crashed down on his head from the rear. He fell to his knees, clutching his head with both hands. Halley, beside himself with fury, levelled his guns with deadly intent. It was Denham's voice that saved Larry's life.

"Wait!" Pete croaked, fighting for breath. "If you kill one of old man Kilrain's sons, every cowprod in the country will go gunnin' for us. I got a better idea."

Halley looked down at him uncertainly. "It better be good, runt!" he fairly spat.

"It is good," Denham said rapidly. "I figger that since I lost our poke, it's up to me to get another. I know where there's a small herd of imported Mule Shoe breedin' stock. There ain't over thirty head, but they'll bring a couple of hundred a piece, even with vented brands. It'll be an easy job, 'cause there's only one night guard, an' we'll get enough dinero so's we can clear the country before it gets too hot to hold us."

Larry staggered to his feet, his blue eyes ablaze. "You dirty, sneakin', little coyote!" he choked. "So this is the way you pay us back for savin' you from the gallows!"

"I ain't thankin' you," Denham said calmly. "I just figger I'm lucky to have met such a pack of soft-hearted fools as you Kilrains."

"What are we goin' to do with this gent?" Halley growled waving a gun at Larry.

"Rope him solid an' leave him in the smoke house. He won't get loose till we're well across the country line," Denham said.

Halley grunted his approval. One of his henchmen went for rope, and within a few minutes Larry found himself trussed hand and foot. His bonds had been tied by Denham, and so expertly that there seemed little hope of him ever freeing himself without help.

The sun had sunk below the horizon when the outlaws lugged him to the smoke house, and smoky Wyoming twilight was beginning to descend. The interior of the smoke house was damp and cold. Larry's teeth began to chatter long before Denham, and his gang finally rode away, and a feeling of utter hopelessness gripped him. He realized that it might be days before anyone thought of looking for him in the smoke house. The oak door was two inches thick, and he was a good hundred feet from the ranch house, so the chances of his attracting attention by yelling were non-existent. But worst of all, he had no way of warning Kirk!

IT WAS almost an hour later that Kirk heard the rattle of approaching horses. The blooded stock had been bedded down for the night in a small box draw, the sides of which were heavily wooded. A chuck fire crackled at the mouth of the draw, and Kirk had been crouched over it, cooking supper. He rose to his feet, now, and strained his eyes in the direction of the on-coming horses. For some reason he felt a deep sense of alarm. The moon was barely showing above the eastern horizon and its dim light served only to confuse the dark shapes of the riders.

"Who's there?" he challenged, resting his palms on his gun butts.

"Larry sent us out to see if you needed help," Pete Denham's voice answered a moment later. "Said he was worried about the herd."

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief. It was so dark he couldn't see their faces, but Denham's explanation of their coming seemed reasonable enough.

"I was just fixin' some chuck. How'd you like to sit in?" he asked when they rode up.

"Suits us," Denham said quickly as he dismounted.

"I'll open another can o' beans, and—" Kirk started to say, but the words froze on his lips. He heard a gasp of incredulity from behind him, and he pivoted on his boot heels. His eyes, dazzled by the fire-light, strove to pierce the gloom enough to recognize Denham's companions. Then, suddenly, he saw the glint of firelight on gun barrels.

"One move an' we'll let you have it!" Jud Halley growled. "I don't savvy how you got outta them ropes, but I'm gamblin' it was because this little runt meant you to. I was a fool for trustin' you, Denham, but you tied your last fancy knot!"

Halley's gun glittered as it arced down on Denham's head. With a grunt of pain, the little outlaw folded and lay still at Halley's feet. Halley's words had sent a chill of dread racing along Kirk's spine. He realized that, as usual, he had been mistaken for his brother, Larry, and by Halley's ominous tone he guessed that Larry must be in desperate trouble. It was obvious too, that Denham had been in on it, and that even his own kind suspected him of treachery.

Gritting his teeth in rage, and desperation, Kirk's hands began to dive toward his guns in a flashing cross draw. But at the same instant, the owlhooters rushed him from behind. He turned, but too late to entirely avoid the gun barrel that was descending toward his head. It struck a glancing blow, driving him to his knees and sending hot needles of pain darting clear down to his heels. With his senses reeling, he allowed his body to collapse in a semblance of unconsciousness. Halley's triumphant laugh cut through the night, and Kirk lay hating him, but not daring to move.

"What you figger on doin' now, Jud?" one of the men asked, "Why don't we just salivate these hombres and dump 'em in the brush?"

Halley's voice was exultant as he explained. "That would be a fool stunt! As Denham said, if we kill Mule Shoe hands, the whole county'll be hot on our trail by sun-up, but if they get killed accidental, no-body'll be suspicious. We'll haze these fancy beef critters till they're rollyeyed, then we'll start 'em stampedin' outta the draw. They'll make mince meat o' these sleepin' beauties an' it'll all look like an accident. Whoever finds what's left o' them will think that the herd just got panicky and took to open range. They'll start cuttin' for the stampeders right away and that'll give us time to get outta the county an' peddle these purty cows for a satisfyin' heap o' foldin' money!"

They moved off, still talking, and Kirk lay rigid until they had mounted and were riding toward the far side of the herd. Denham groaned softly in the darkness behind him. Kirk staggered to his feet and walked unsteadily over to Denham's prostrate form. Then, gritting his teeth against the pain in his head, he gripped the sight outlaw under the arms and began to drag him toward the mouth of the draw. There was deep loathing in his heart for Pete Denham, but never once did he consider leaving him to the fate Halley had planned for them both.

The entrance to the draw was guarded by a high, gatelike formation of rock, and it was toward this Kirk headed, dragging Denham after him. He was still a hundred feet from it when he heard the staccato bark of guns behind him. Halley and his bunch had started hazing the herd!

IT WAS a familiar, low-pitched rumble that first beat into Pete Denham's slowly returning consciousness. He felt the grip of hands under his armpits, next, and knew suddenly that he was being dragged along the ground. His eyes opened wide, then. The moon had begun to clear the tree-tops, and silhouetted against it he saw a wall of tossing horns and heads bearing down on him. Fear brought his strength back with a rush.

"Leave me up!" he gasped. "I can take care o' myself now."

Kirk paused long enough to help him to his feet and together they sprinted down the sandy wash. The thunder of hooves rose to a crescendo behind them, and the shrill yelps of

the raiders echoed in the draw. Denham cast a look over his shoulder. The advancing sea of cattle was barely fifty feet behind them! At that moment, believing he was about to die, it came to Denham with overwhelming clarity that he had been wrong all his life. Twice that day the Kilrain brothers had risked their lives in his behalf—first Larry, now Kirk. He remembered vividly the glorious, breathtaking deeds he had always wanted to do, and somehow they were pale compared to what the twins had done for him. Suddenly he saw himself clearly for the first time in his life, and he loathed what he saw! His feet faltered, then stopped. Kirk stopped too, shouting at him to hurry.

"No," Denham said calmly. "We both can't make it, but maybe one of us can."

Then, before Kirk could interfere, he crouched behind a boulder that was barely large enough to conceal him. He palmed his guns, and flame lashed from his fists at the oncoming cattle. The lead animals went down and the others began to pile up over them in a bellowing, frenzied mass of lashing hoofs and horns, that completely blocked the narrow draw mouth. With three long strides, Kirk was at his side, adding the chorus of his own guns to Denham's.

"That took guts!" he growled.

Pete Denham stopped firing long enough to glance at Kirk's stern young face, ruddy-hued in the reflected gun flame. Then, suddenly, his eyes began to brim. Glory had come to Denham in a way he least expected!

Lead began to burn through the blackness around them, then. Halley and his bunch had mingled with the herd and were triggering from the backs of their mounts. The low moon silhouetted them clearly. A faint, grim smile lifted the corners of Kirk's lips. His guns bucked, and two riders disappeared under the sea of milling cattle. He heard Halley's yell of consternation and saw that the big outlaw was trying to fight his mount clear of the close-packed herd. Blue's guns hammered, too, but Halley bent low over his pommel and the shots missed.

THEN A new sound crashed out over the clamor of the terrified cattle. Kirk's heart leaped joyously as he recognized the rolling thunder of two rapidly thumbed guns. Only Larry could make his weapons talk like that! The gun flashes were stabbing from the woods behind the herd. A yell of horror broke from Halley's lips as he realized that he was trapped. His huge form loomed against the moon as he stood in his stirrups and emptied his guns wildly at his new assailants. Then he melted from sight as a new volley blazed from Larry's guns.

"Larry!" Kirk yelled exultantly, "Are you all right?"

"You bet! Dad an' me both!" echoed Larry's answering shout.

But there was no time for talk till the white-faces had been rounded up and lulled back to rest. It was an hour later that Pete Denham faced the three Kilrain's as they sat around a fire, gulping coffee. Old Dave Kilrain had been eyeing him sternly for the past few minutes.

"You sure tied Larry with man-size knots!" he growled, "If I hadn't figgered somethin' was wrong on account o' Larry's bronc bein' in the cavvy an' him gone, he'd be in the smoke house yet."

"How'd you find him, anyhow?" Denham asked faintly.

"Just turned his bronc loose without feedin' him. He made a bee line for the smoke house an' near kicked the door in. That ornery cayuse won't let nobody feed him but Larry."

Denham rose to his feet and stood looking down at the Kilrain's for a long time. Finally he said huskily:

"I been doin' some thinkin' in the

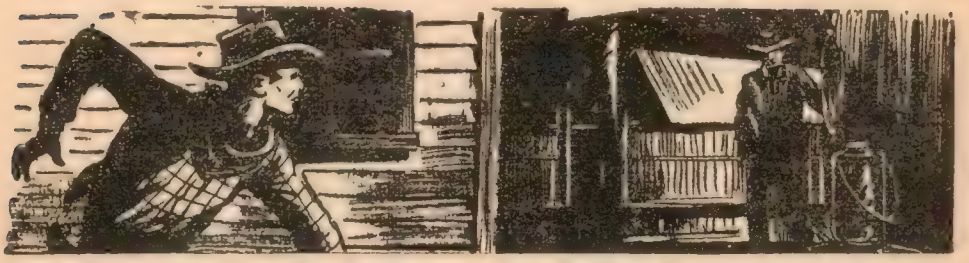
past hour. All I want outta life now is to be like you Kilrain's an' the only way for me to do that is by startin' clean. I'm goin' back to town to tell Sheriff Wylie I'm ready to start payin' for all the harm I've done. I never killed a man, 'ceptin' in self-defense, but if the law figgers it'll need a hangin' to square my tally, all right."

The three watched silently as he saddled up. When he finally mounted and rode into the night with just one backward look, Larry said softly: "It took a lot o' provin', but I knew no man could be all bad who was kind to his horse!"

★

The Defeat Of Big Hawk McBeath

by Edward Garner



Big Hawk McBeath had the hardest teeth
That the West had ever known;
When just a tyke he could chew a spike
As a dog could a juicy bone.
No restaurant steak could make him quake,
And ofttimes when hungry, he
Would eat the plate and find it great,
Then call for some iron rust tea!

One day Colt Fay thought he would pay
His respects with a mighty fist,
And he hit Hawk's mouth like a drought the South
An error he later hissed;
For he missed Hawk's lips when he came to grips,
And met grinders that, sharp and hard
Just found it play to slice their way
To his elbow as though through lard!

Big Hawk McBeath on his native heat
Went into the woods in quest
Of a large oak tree, one from which he
Could get plank for a nice love nest.
He forgot his axe, (these are the facts
He bent like a diving grouse,
And gnawed it down and won renown—
It made a ten-room house!

A drummer gent with no good intent
Ran away with Big Hawk's wife,
And Big Hawk's pride called for that gent's hide,
And bloody and fearful strife;
But the sheriff knew what Hawk planned to do,
And served him some papers designed
To keep him home so he could not roam
For the pilgrim for whom he pined.

Big Hawk was sad, and he felt so bad
That he entered the *Gulch Saloon,*
The barkeep saw with a touch of awe
That he had no more teeth than a rune;
Although it pained, Big Hawk explained
As he swallowed a quart of grape,
" "!!!&&&*** I broke 'em all
Trying to cut through that sheriff's red-tape!

Was a corrupt lawman better than mob-rule? Jesse Grady thought so and he left his bride of a few hours to prove it...

YOU'LL HANG LEGAL!

by A. A. BAKER

ADELE WAS driving the team. Fall rains, racing swiftly across Montana had beaten the dust and packed ruts until the greased springs jounced the buckboard smoothly. Jesse Grady had unbuttoned the tight vest of his Nankeen suit, his stocky frame rolling with the sway of the vehicle as he played his foolish little game, betting himself that the extended ash of his Longnine cigar would drop before Adele spoke. Then, shouting with laughter, he'd plant a kiss against the soft curve of his wife's cheek, relishing the blush that would follow and bring her rebuke, "Jesse, you stop that now!" But the sparkle in her azure eyes would refute any denial of his bridegroom privileges.

"Even the sun appeared on our wedding day," she began.

Jesse laughed and kissed her. He held her tightly, her bodice rising under his arms until she relaxed against him.

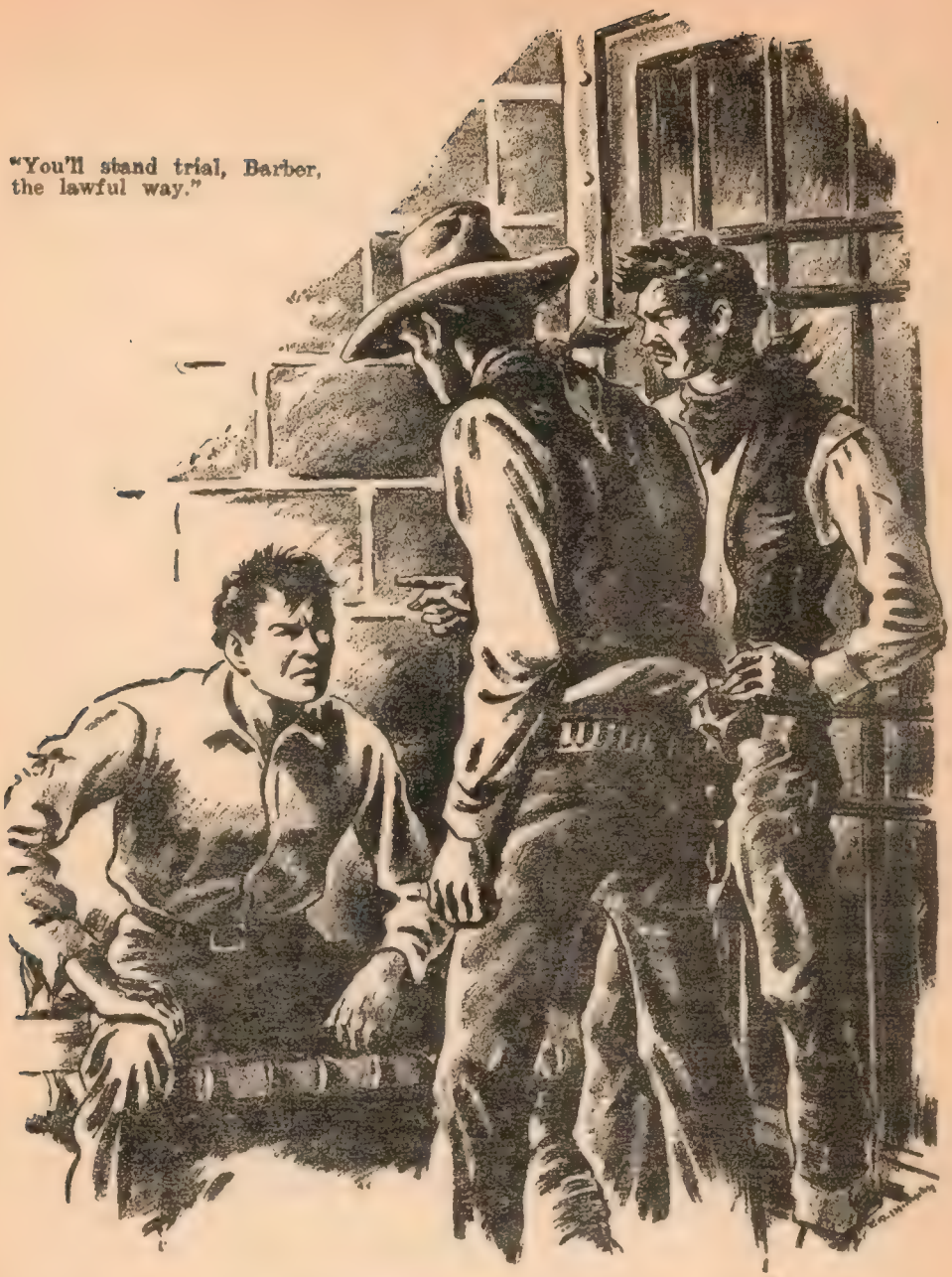
"Oh, Jesse, it will be wonderful. Our own place, our own family. Two tall sons at least and one beautiful daughter."

It was Grady who felt his face redden. He lay his arm over her shoulder and felt the reins tug through her rounded softness. He hadn't thought of a family. This was wild country. A land of harsh peaks, of winter mad rivers, of wind driven snow storms. Grangers worked tensely during the summers to provide for the long winters. What right did a man have planning a family? He winced as she continued, her eyes directed into a sky of vagrant scudding clouds.

"They'll grow up decent and honest. They'll have a chance then. The vigilantes will see to that..."

"Those stranglers?" he spat the words. "Lynch law'll never make a country right. Real law maybe, judges and juries to decide—yes." Grady drew deep on his cigar. There was his trouble. He had tried to explain, had fought to drag words up from the past. But how could you tell a young woman of gunfights? Of the exultation when you stacked your courage against another's? Those sorties by reckless, outnumbered men actually racing into Indian war parties, to be the first to kill? Jesse knew. He remembered the taste of fury that rose in his mouth. A man was as good as he could force others to believe he was.

Grady had tried when he arrived in Montana and first met Adele. He had hired on with her father, avoiding sprees in Bannack and Silver Springs. But her faith in Vigilantes—it went against the grain of a fighting man. Vigilantes were packs hunting down and stringing up one man.



"You'll stand trial, Barber, the lawful way."

"And what'd your Sheriff Barber do?" she blurted. "Or your court—Barber's court—when they wounded that Dutchman? Left his bleeding body to freeze." Her tone became contrite. "Oh, Jesse, he was such a boy. Did he deserve to freeze, alone? How can you defend those murderers?"

"Adele." He motioned her to silence, but she continued.

"Can you support a sheriff whose gun is law? His road tax—that is never explained. His official threats that make possemen out of ranchers. Mur-

derers wear his deputy badges. That deputy, Cantrill, who has killed men with an axe handle! If you prefer Sheriff Barber to the Vigilantes, then..."

UP AHEAD, a horseman was growing larger. The animal dripped foam and the rider kept flicking the worn horse with a willow switch.

Adele drew rein, easing the team to the right until the wheels sank inches into the grass. They waited.

"It's Ace Helm." Grady recognized the saloon man and let his mind go blank. He hoped Helm would say how-do and go on; but all the while, Jesse realized that a newly-married couple had to expect some rawhiding. Grady cocked his slouch hat back, braced his bootheel against the sack of canned goods in the foot well and stole a glance at Adele. She had tensed; her hands were rigid on the black leather of the reins.

Helm drew up, his face reddened from wind and exertion. He leaned wearily forward and his how-do was blunt. Then he slid out of the creaking saddle and Jesse joined him on the ground. Helm walked away and Grady silently followed.

"Sheriff Barber sent me after you, Jess." It was an order.

"What trouble's Barber got, Ace?"

"They got—them damned Stranglers—got Barber's boy. Sayin' he done up the Dutchman."

"I can't go now, Ace." Grady flicked a hand toward the buckboard. "Just been married; taking my wife home."

"We'll need you an' every one else," Helm answered. "Big thing." Ace Helm lowered his voice, bringing his wind reddened face close. "Barber says you're to head back into Silver Springs. Do something to hold the hangin' off. Barber says *anything*. He's got to have time to round up our men. Expects to hit in there by morning. Barber's wild, ravin' worse'n a coyote with the conniptions. You better go, Jesse. Adele'll go along with me. Hitch this plug onto the buckboard, that'll give you a fresh horse."

"I'm not even carrying a gun, Ace." Grady tried to keep the worry out of his voice yet knowing he'd give in. He added lamely. "Fella doesn't go armed to get married..."

"You take my Colt," Helm was loosing the belt buckle, "and my bowie." He thrust the weapons forward then noticing Grady's reluctance, gritted. "You want to go on livin' in this country, Jesse? You do what Barber says—less'n you're lined up with them lynchers..."

Grady spat, reached for the weapons and pointed. "Unhitch the off-colored bay."

Adele remained silent as Grady talked, explaining why he was needed back at Silver Springs. That it was a showdown. That they would hang Barber's boy. She was stoney in her silence and he looked back just once. Her back was ramrod straight.

Adele hadn't raised her voice; her ultimatum had been uttered through clenched teeth. It was to haunt him for the days to come. "If you go now, Jesse Grady," her blue eyes had blazed, "don't come back to the ranch. I knew, Jesse, that you were with Quantrill at Lawrence—and all those other things. But I believed you'd left that life behind. Then I married you." She had broken it off, not turning to watch him ride away."

GRADY SUCKED in a breath and suddenly remembered his cigar; it was soggy in his mouth. He had chewed a dead cigar while his wife was fighting for her happiness. With disgust, he spat then hupped the bay into a lope toward Silver Springs.

Silver Springs appeared deserted, like a Sunday noon just before the church congregation streams from the double doors, except for the number of

horses, like a calvary troop. Men tethered twelve horses in the boarded lot next to the Opera House; below, before the street jagged off, the jail-yard corral was crammed with saddled animals.

That would be the Vigilantes; they had taken Dan Barber there to the jail. The Opera House committee would be decided, hammering their questions, bolstering themselves with evidence to complete the final act. Next they would bring Dan out, walk him through a double row of men, each with cocked pistol, to the scaffold. Grady's eyes followed the street; each store was closed. The door braces sunk home, the windows bleak against drawn shades. The saloons were dead, their double doors slammed closed; no business today. Jesse grimaced. That was the tricky part—those shopkeepers, their shiny sleeve protectors tucked up under coat sleeves. They would be the ones at the Opera House.

Once the sheriff thundered in, it would be a different story; he would bring fighting men: Cowboys off the ranches, gunfighters from Bannack and Nevada City, men blooded in the war, real gun hands pitted by the explosion of percussion caps. They would see to it that a shopkeepers place was behind the counters. If Dan had really killed that Dutch boy, he would be tried legal, even if Sheriff Barber was his father. The thought turned sour in Grady's brain, turned into a question. Would he condemn his own son? Would he, Jesse, condemn a son of Adele's? But that would be for the judge and jury, out of the sheriff's hands. It wasn't Grady's problem; he was here to prevent the Vigilantes from lynching Dan. What followed later would be guesswork. He tucked Helm's Colt into the front of his pants, buttoned his coat and rode down the slope. He traveled the center of the rutted street until he reached the Opera House.

Sorenson was posted, rifle cocked, in the glassed ticket window. Grady took the stairs carefully. He caught Sorenson's eyes then looked beyond the Dutchman's head. There was a red poster of last year's performance. GOTHAM'S FINEST. PRESENTING A FULL WEEK OF GALA ENTERTAINMENT. Grady jerked his head toward the closed door.

"No." Sorenson opened his mouth to explain, then tensely shook his head.

"You got Dan in there?"

"No; sentenced already. He's at the jail." The storekeeper paused. "Jesse, you was married jest a little bit ago; don't mix up in this." His blond eyebrows rose as he inspected Grady's empty holster.

"I could say the same thing to you, Sorenson; I'm going in."

Sorenson raised his voice in a shout. "Hank; You watch this Jesse Grady; he's with Sheriff Barber. He's come for trouble."

As Grady turned away, he heard Hank's trigger click. Swiftly he broke around the side of the Opera House; his feet hit the plank side stairs. Then Grady was on the exit platform, laying his shoulder desperately against the wide door. It gave and he was inside. In the gloom he found the door brace, jammed it home, then turned and crouched with his Colt ready.

THE ROOM was cold. Shadows covered the stacked seats that were bulky wads hidden by green canvas. On the stage, a dozen startled men whirled, their figures doubled by skinny shadows from the single coal oil lantern. Grady recognized the leader. A huge hump-backed miner named Cross, who was reported to be tunneling into a sure bonanza back of Shorter's Ridge. Cross was crouched, the bushy brows drawn as he peered into the gloom. His upper teeth were snags,

and the lips grew wet as he shouted. "Who's goin' on down there?"

"It's Jesse Grady." Sorenson's voice blared from the entrance. "Busted in the side door. Fixin' to..."

"To plug the first man who moves!" Grady finished. "Cross, you step to the rim—just there. Hold your hands out to the sides. You move'n I shoot!" Grady stalked down and looked up. Cross was bewildered, shaping words.

"You the same Grady—fella who got married this mornin'? We interferin' with your honeymoon?" Cross smirked, rolled his eyes sideways and drew a relieved chuckle from the tableau of tense committeemen.

"Yeah," Grady snapped. "Heard you tried Dan Barber for murdering Sonerson's delivery wagon boy? *And* convicted him?"

"He done it, Grady." The speaker moved forward. It was Moon. Jesse had rented the buckboard from Moon's stable to ride Adele home in style.

"How'd you know? He confess?" The Colt burned in his hand as Moon's eyes dropped.

"They never confess!" yelled Cross. "They go to the last drop swearin' they never done nothin' wrong. Out in California..."

"You should have kept your Lynch Law out there, Cross. Montana's got law." Grady felt better now; these men were split, huddled in this dark hall.

"Dan was with me when the Dutchman was robbed." Grady laid it out bluntly.

"You're a damned liar!" Cross shouted. The man tried to straighten his humped back, his hand dropping slowly toward his holster.

"You don't like that, Cross? You don't like convicting a man who never did it? A court'd get *all* the facts."

Cross looked down, glaring across the void into the unwavering barrel of Grady's Colt.

"The sheriff'll be here in the morning, Cross. I'll give him the rest of my story—all the details, little things that convict a man or free him. You never thought about that, huh? You just hunt 'em down, hold a rumped up court, convict them and hang them, don't you, Cross? You have to hang Barber, don't you? Hang him lest he gets cleared and comes gunning for you? Then you can't sell your spuds or work your mines? You stretch necks and it don't make much difference if they did it. You use it as a warning—don't do nothing wrong in Silver Springs or the lynching Vigilantes'll string you up!"

Grady stared around, watching eyes drop. He had lied, but he had won this round. Facing a gun they got to thinking, about their businesses, their families, their wives. Grady felt a pain. What would Adele think about his lie? He shrugged the thought away.

"I'm going down to the jail, Cross, and you're going along. And just remember, Vigilantes come under the law, too; we're staying with Dan till the sheriff comes." His face set. "The rest of you up there—you hang Dan and Cross'll need a coffin!" He felt huge stepping back out of the circle of light and edging past the stacked chairs. He'd won his bluff and...

"Grady!" Cross' voice rasped across the stage.

"You coming, Cross?" Grady cocked the Colt and watched Cross pull in a deep breath. "I'll go along," Cross blurted. Grady nodded, his neck relaxing.

THE JAIL was a tight circular room. Cells reaching in a semi-circle around half the building and facing the potbellied stove and the jailor's scarred desk. Dan Barber, a narrow-faced boy with his thin neck rising from a man's shoulders, was there. He wore a knee-length yellow coat, collared with Montana wolf. The coat was bunched together by a slick cowhide belt. Dan Barber was cold, Grady

reflected, cold way down to his bones. The picture of a corpse—the frozen corpse of a Dutch boy—floated through Grady's mind as he prodded Cross into a corner cell and slammed the door with a jar.

Dan Barber clawed the bars, reaching an arm through palms upward, in pleading. "Don't let them do it, Jesse; don't let them lynch me."

"They ain't." He watched the staring white face that was swept by unbelieving hysteria. "They ain't doing nothing except hold you till your pa comes. We have the leader—Cross here—as a kind of guarantee."

Outside could be heard the disgruntled curses of men leaving. The clatter of hoofs softening the creak of leather. In here it was quiet. Grady could hear Dan's choked breathing. Then Dan Barber sobbed and sank weakly onto the cot. Grady shuttled a chair next to the stove. What would Adele think? He'd been out with her, riding, the day the Dutchboy was murdered. On that same afternoon he'd asked if she'd be his wife, so she wasn't likely to forget. Grady scowled and reasoned that, after all, all he'd done in this case was use extreme methods to prevent a lynching. But how would his lie be tied together once Dan was brought into court? What would the judge think when he retracted his statement? And those vigilantes. Would they smother their pride or would they rise in anger? Grady broke the line of thought. He was finished in Montana. He was as sure of this as he was that Adele was just as finished with him.

"Grady?" Cross' voice broke through Barber's sobs. "What's next? You know the sheriff is a damned crook. If he'd taken care of his job, there'd of been no need for us..."

"Shut up!" Dan Barber broke in. "Shut up, you stinking strangler! With a pack at your back, you're tough. Once I get out of here..."

"Quiet down, Dan," Grady snapped.

But the hate was built up like a violently ranking fever. Dan raved on. "Once I'm out, I'm gunnin' down every damn man had a damn thing to do with this! Cross and Moon, that snivelin' Doctor Jones, and..."

"You'll shut up!" Grady stomped across the space and raked his gun barrel across the bars, driving Dan back. "You're safe for now so let it drop!"

Suddenly Grady was weary. He'd lost Adele; he'd lied. He had been ready to kill back there in the big hall. And what for? To save the hide of this ranting young gun-happy buck. Why hadn't he told Helm to go to hell? This was like the war. The man in the blue kept throwing slugs in the belief that he was as right as the Butternuts. These Vigilantes, gathered in a huddle somewhere outside, were plotting to rescue their commander. They were disorganized now but dangerous in their mortification. They believed they had to take over because the sheriff and the courts were crooked. Grady felt like a bale of hay in a whirlpool, ready to come apart and be torn into a million straws. He closed his ears to the steady stream of muttered curses from Barber's cell, pulled his hat down and huddled in the chair next to the stove to wait out the long night until Sheriff Barber could arrive and assume the job.

THE POSSE came with the dawn. A rattle of horsemen broke through Grady's long, sleepless reverie. Dan was screaming, a wild rebel yelp that tore through Grady's brain. Cross was braced, his calloused hands ridged against the bars.

Grady opened the door allowing Sheriff Barber to shoulder past. The sheriff was huge, a black mustache bristled against a face that was a frozen block of hate that mingled with relief. He stood in the center of the room

glaring. Possemen crowded in, behind their chiseled faces reddened by the cold.

"Get back out..." the sheriff turned slowly and the force of his restrained anger moved his followers back. "Close that door!" the red rimmed eyes blazed into Grady's. Grady kicked the door closed and waited.

"Open Dan's cell!" It was as though the sheriff had rehearsed every word, every order and gesture. Grady felt a cold drift of worry sweep over him. Sheriff Barber was like a man ready to break loose but holding onto his fury as you'd hold a bucking horse by the tail as you were whipped against the corral beams.

Grady turned the key in the lock. Dan slammed the door open and stood, crouched.

The sheriff's glare had found Cross. "Who's that?"

"Cross," Dan snarled. "The leader of them stranglers, Pa. Grady's been keepin' him till you come."

"You was goin' to lynch my boy?" The sheriff shifted his body.

Cross grunted, his voice hollow. "He was tried fair. *He done it.*"

"You don't wait for the law?" the sheriff roared. "Silver Springs don't want law? All right, Cross; there ain't no law—now. It's you and your kind who need the law. We'll see how you stand up without it. We'll take the law out of Silver Springs. We'll make murder legal! Dan?" he upended a long barreled Colt and held it out, butt forward.

Dan Barber danced up, hooked the gun in a hate-crazed hand, then whirled and the gun blared.

Sickened, Grady broke forward and hacked at Barber's gun hand. Dan reeled but as he staggered away, he hammered more slugs into Cross' cell. Cross was flattened against the side bars, seeking the meager protection of the iron straps lacing the cell. Grady struck out, felt his fist glance off the bobbing head, then swarmed over the crazed killer. Behind, he heard Cross scream in agony and knew the sheriff was hammering a gunbarrel across his temple. Grady felt the skin part as the slight cut deep just before he slumped and the whole jail room spun. He remembered striking the floor, then a red glare spread across his eyes and he knew he was going out.

JESSE GRADY came to laying in a blaze of sunlight breaking through the open door. It was deathly quiet; the jail cells yawed. He felt his way to his feet and staggered to the door. The street was a muddy, disheveled mess. Bedclothing, furniture, the broken spokes of a crib, a smashed flour barrel that spread paste in the wagon ruts. It was as though the calvary had raced through, close on the heels of a retreat and driving citizens before it. Jesse Grady flattened his palm against his temple, holding the pounding vien. What had the sheriff shouted? *"We'll take the law out of Silver Springs. We'll make murder legal..."* And had immediately started by turning a gun over to Dan Barber. Then madly pistol whipping Grady himself.

But what had happened to Silver Springs? Still dazed, Grady stepped out. His eyes burned against the sun. He stumbled to the Opera House and looked in. It was deserted. Grady found his horse, it seemed days since the bay gelding had pulled with a team on the buckboard. Days since he had sat with his bride and watched Joe Helm ride up.

There was the banging of a piano at the *Trail's End Saloon* and the discordant music of drunken laughter. Grady reined in, standing in his stirrups to peer over the batwings. Sheriff Barber was holding a whiskey bottle high and shouting. Someone had started a fire in a bucket and was

tearing the I. O. U. book to shreds then chortling as the flames licked close to his fingers.

Grady listened, the sheriff's words were jelling. "An' so—as the new Silver Springs Vigilante Ccommittee has met has considered—has now arrived at their lawful verdict..." the possemen hooted ..."then let the sentence be pronounced."

The sheriff whirled and pointed a beefy arm. Grady stared. The men of the Opera House, those same men who had backed down from his gun, were pressed into the far corner of the saloon. The deputy, Cantrill, wearing Texas batwings and a red shirt, stood guard and revolved an axe handle in gloved hands. He poked into the press of men apparently admonishing them to be quiet.

"Said sentence," blurted Sheriff Barber, "that they be executed. That their necks be stretched. As they would stretch the neck of every man here if they was runnin' this show. This said stretching, shall be executed at sundown!"

The sheriff glared out and met Grady's eyes. The big head nodded then jerked, plainly indicating—*Get!* Grady stared and the sheriff narrowed his eyes, frowning, then once again wordlessly warned Grady off.

Confused, Grady reined away letting the animal have his head. It quickened pace and jogged for Moon's stable. Grady slid off the gelding and some vagrant impulse directed his feet back toward the jail. He stepped across to Cross' cell. The man was sprawled, one arm wrapped around the leg of the cot.

JESSE GRADY entered the cell and felt the body. Cross groaned, rolled over and opened his eyes. The jagged teeth showed in a snarl.

"You hurt bad?" Grady asked.

"Some." Cross clambered to his feet and swayed. "What's goin' on?"

Grady quickly explained about the deserted town, the rump court at the *Trail's End*. The drunken jury, controlled by the wild hate of the sheriff.

"So?" Cross demanded. "What'd you expect, Grady? Dan Barber killed the Dutch boy, we know that. We knew what kind of a man the sheriff was—now *you* know. He'll get Dan outa the country after he lynches the committee. Who'll touch him then? He'll have this country ..." Cross spread his fingers and drew them slowly into a fist.

Grady lowered his head, feeling Cross' eyes glaring down on his bent back. Suddenly it struck him like the blow of a fist. Adele had tried to tell him, she had said the Vigilantes were right, that they were just trying to rid the county of a gunslick sheriff. They were trying to unload corruption, to clean up the law. And he, Jesse Grady, had ridden off. Had left his bride, had lied to defeat a group of men's honest attempts. What Grady had done, leaving a stain of guerilla warfare in his calm belief in his right to gun his way through life, was past. There would be law and order but it would be brought by citizens believing

in right. But now, Barber was in control ... *Was* Adele right? If the real Vigilantes could lynch, then didn't Barber's possemen have that same privilege?

Grady raised his eyes. Cross was tucking a bandana against a bleeding wound in his chest.

"Have you—got any more?" Grady asked slowly. "Any more vigilantes like in Bannack or ...?"

"Yeah," Cross grunted. "We can raise an army, given twelve hours."

"All right." Grady spoke decisively. "Take that bay, get to riding. I'll keep the sheriff and his posse so damned busy they won't lynch anybody till you get back. You mount up and circle around behind the church." Grady paused wondering for a second if it was proper to use a church as a shield then shrugged the thought away. "When you hear shooting in the saloon—ride for Bannack!"

As Cross hurried out, Grady felt a surge of warmth. Adele would understand this. And the weapon, to control the sheriff, was right here in Silver Springs. Dan Barber. If the sheriff's fury could lead him to lynch murder because of his son, then Dan Barber could be used to hold the vengeance off—until Cross could arrive with help.

Grady marched back to the saloon. His arm raised to slam back the batwings was halted. Adele's voice broke through. "Jesse!"

He turned his head. She was standing on the church steps. "Jesse, please..." it was as though she could read his thoughts. He crossed over and stood, looking up at her.

"Oh, Jesse, what have you done?" It was an accusation. "They say you freed Dan Barber, that the sheriff is going to hang all those men. Jesse..."

"He'll try." The words were suddenly loosed in his throat. "But we'll soon stop that." He explained about Cross and about his own plan to bring Dan Barber out of the saloon to take him back to the jail. "That," he ended lamely, "seems about the only way left."

Slowly she nodded, her eyes wide with concern. Jauntily now, he started to turn back toward the saloon and said over his shoulder. "Adele, you ride out. Keep going till you find a U. S. Marshal. You bring him back here, understand? You bring him here if it takes you a week."

HIS STEPS were even and firm as he recrossed the street and entered the batwings to crouch inside with his Colt out. This was the second time he had used that Colt to take a man out, but for some reason this time he felt calm and unworried.

"I came for Dan," he said clearly and watched Barber twist around.

"You crazy?" the sheriff's speech was thick.

"I was, Barber, but not now." Grady moved into the frozen group, elbowed the sheriff aside and jammed the gun barrel into Dan Barber's side before anyone was really aware of his intention.

Grady flicked his eyes to the captured Vigilantes. "If one of these men are hurt, this kid gets it. All six slugs. Understand? Now," Grady pushed the Colt deep into the yellow cloth of Dan's coat. "Now, Danny boy, get! We're going back to jail."

He heard the whisper of Cantrills flailing axe and moved his head. The blow struck his arm, but he held grimly onto the gun. Now Cantrill was striking another blow. Grady shoved his shoulder into the deputy's stomach, swinging the Colt. It exploded with a cough-swaddled roar. Cantrill sagged forward, falling. The sheriff had flipped his pistol upward and blasted; Cantrill's body took the slug. Grady twisted, leveling his gun down at the sheriff's hips. Two slugs erupted and he watched the sheriff crumple.

Again Grady rammed the gun against the open mouthed Dan's waist. The

sheriff's shout broke the rush. "Hold off—he'll kill Dan!"

From the saloon to the jail seemed miles. Grady's clamped thumb holding the hammer down, his finger bearing full weight on the trigger, marched the white faced Dan back to the jail. The possemen, cursing, drunken, tramped with him. Grady paused at the doorway swinging Dan Barber around to shout. "Now get back. Stay away from this jail. One man tries to come through this door—and I'll kill the varmint! Understand?"

"How long," shouted a posseman, "can you hold out? We'll. . . ."

"Until Cross brings his Vigilantes from Bannack!" Grady interrupted. "Did you forget about Cross? Well, he's gone for help; come night, there'll be a thousand men in here."

A long low whistle errupted in the sudden silence. A harsh voice cursed. "I'm gettin' out . . ."

Grady shouldered Dan Barber inside, slammed the bolt home and locked him in a cell. He stared down at the Colt. It had drained all of the fury out of him, sucked him dry. This wasn't over. Cross would be back at the head of a disciplined mob of fighters; they'd find the wounded sheriff and the Silver Springs Committee would be safe.

The possemen would be gone. Drifted out. Leaderless now, to scatter. Grady opened the rifle case, shucked cartridges into the breeches.

"Jesse—you gonna." The voice startled Grady. "you gonna let them lynch me?"

"No, Dan." Grady had the answer now. "Adele was wrong—about the Vigilantes. About them making this country safe. I was wrong expecting a crooked sheriff to protect honest folks. But there's a government Marshal on the way—Adele'll see to that. He's real law. D'yuh understand that, Dan? You might hang if you shot that Dutch boy, but if you are, you're going to hang legal." Grady's voice rose harshly. "Them damned Vigilantes try to take you outa this jail—they'll find that out!"

★

The Killing of Yellow Hand

[*Continued From Page* 48]

or the white soldiers? The public must be its own judge.

The general conception—that Buffalo Bill engaged Yellow Hand in a hand-to-hand knife and tomahawk combat—is utterly false. Another version is that Buffalo Bill and Yellow Hand rode at each other on horseback; that Yellow Hand fired a rifle and missed, but that Buffalo Bill's shot killed the Indian's horse. With that, Yellow Hand, took deliberate aim at Buffalo Bill as he rode towards him and fired; but luckily, Bill's horse hit a gopher hole and threw him to the ground. This saved his life, as the Indian's bullet struck where Bill had just been. Of course, Buffalo Bill then shot and killed Yellow Hand; rushed up to him, scalped him, and dramatically yelled: "First scalp for Custer."

At the first analysis, the general conception of the thing sounds like the work of Ned Buntline, the old fogey who wrote about Buffalo Bill, Hickok, and other noted characters of the western frontier. They, in turn, tried to live up to his writing and expectations. After a careful study and thorough investigation of the affair, I am still of the opinion that the first analysis is correct.

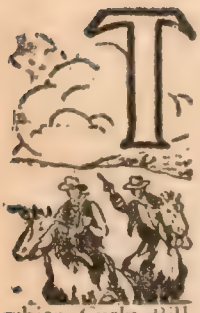
★

Fred White was no professional gunman, and he was up against characters like Curly Bill — who'd do anything for a laugh. And Curly Bill should have said to White, "This one will kill you, Fred," — because it did!

TOMBSTONE'S FIRST MARSHAL

Special Feature

by LEW SMITH



TOMBSTONE was roaring. Lawlessness was in the saddle, and the new silver-mining town there on the Arizona plateau was corrupt and wicked. On January 6, 1880, the town council met and decided, once again, to try to whip the lawless element—of which Curly Bill Brocius and the Clanton clan were the leaders.

"We have to have a town marshal," one man said. "Sheriff Behan is doing nothing —the rustlers are rustling, and killers are killing on our streets. This town needs a marshal that can clean it up for once and for always!"

There was a moment's pause. Then one man—a storekeeper—spoke in solemn tones. "Wyatt Earp is the man for the job, but he is deputy U. S. Marshal and he has his hands full trying to stop these bullion robberies. And he can't hold down two jobs."

The upshot was that the storekeeper was appointed a committee of one to sound out prospective candidates for the office. By nightfall he had Fred White lined up for the job, and White was immediately sworn into office.

"I don't know about White," one member said slowly. "Fred is a good man, but he's no gunman—and it will take a man with a fast gun to trim the mane on Brocius and Old Man Clanton and the other gunslingers."

"White is the only man I could find."

"How about Morgan Earp, Wyatt's brother?"

"I never asked him."

"Well, Fred has the job now...so we'll see what we see."

As the man had said, Fred White was no professional gunman. He was a quiet man, with strong convictions about right and wrong; but he was also a thoughtful one, who carefully weighed the odds against his office. And the odds were overwhelmingly in favor of the enemy. Curly Bill Brocius was a killer, who boasted of his record. He and the Clantons robbed stages of Tombstone silver bullion; they stole cattle and horses across the Border in Old Mexico; and they generally had things their own way. The last few days had been spent in "shooting-up" the mining town. It was dangerous for a man or woman to walk the streets. The outlaw gang openly defied the town's ordinances. They packed guns when their guns should have been checked at the saloons or hotels or livery-barns; they rode their broncs on the sidewalks and through

Lawlessness in and around Tombstone had gone too far...

saloons. Marshal White's job was to stop these practices and enforce the town ordinances. Being aware of his danger, perhaps wondering why he had taken such a tough job, he contacted Wyatt Earp, who had been in Tucson for a few days and had just returned to Tombstone.

"Wyatt, I need help."

Wyatt Earp knew that the Brocius-Clanton gang hated him. He had tried to get them on stage-robbery charges, for, being Deputy U. S. Marshal, his job was to keep the outlaws from interfering with the U. S. Mails. They had robbed stagecoaches carrying the mails.

The conference took place in the Earp cabin, which was located back of the Bird Cage Theatre. Also in the cabin were Wyatt's brother, Morgan, and Fred Dodge, a Wells, Fargo operator who, under cover, was helping Wyatt solve the stage robberies. Morgan, later to become Tombstone's town-marshal, sat on a bunk, saying nothing; and Dodge was at the table, playing solitaire.

"Not my job," Wyatt Earp reminded.

White looked at his big hands. "I know it isn't; but I need help. The way it looks to me, Brocius and the Clantons are after you, Wyatt. Somebody is out there on Allen Street now, hollering and shooting off his gun and bellowin' for somebody to come out and arrest him."

Morgan Earp looked up. "Sounds like Curly Bill."

THE ROAR of Curly Bill's pistol was loud and frequent. He was shooting out the windows of a saloon. He was standing in

the street, legs wide, hollering and shooting. He was openly defying the law.

"Okay," Wyatt said, "I'll help you."

"How'll we do it?" White asked.

A man came into the cabin, for the door was open. Winters were not severe here along the Border, in the high mesa country, and the door was open most of the year.

"Curly Bill is out on the street," the man said.

"He alone, or with the Clantons?" asked Fred White.

"He's alone; he's hollerin' for somebody to come out an' arrest him, Marshal."

The man left. "How'll we go about it?" White asked again. "You've met situations like this in Dodge and Wichita, Wyatt."

"You come in one end of the street and I'll come in the other; we'll pen him in and work him over."

Morgan Earp got to his feet. "I'll watch from the sidewalk and see that nobody else horns in."

"Thanks, Morgan," Fred White said.

Dodge said, "I'll be with Morgan."

They went outside the cabin. "I wish it wasn't so close to darkness," Wyatt Earp said; "We'd best act fast before it gets too dark."

When White and Earp came into the street, Curly Bill Brocius saw first Wyatt Earp; then he turned and looked at Marshal Fred White. He was, in the parlance of the day, "boxed in." Quick logic told him that Earp was the more deadly. Wyatt Earp was the master of the sixshooter, a fact many men had learned...too late. Wyatt carried his Buntline Special. This special revolver, a Colt, had been given to him by Ned Buntline, an author of Western stories. It had a long twelve-inch barrel, and Wyatt Earp knew how to use it, either shooting it or "buffaloing" his man with it. He was a master at the art of "buffaloing." He could hit just right—on the side of a man's head—and knock him instantly unconscious.

So Curly Bill Brocius stood and waited, pistol in his hand. Wyatt Earp moved to get out of the line of possible fire, his hand on his Buntline. But it was Marshal Fred White that Curly Bill faced. "You're under arrest," the marshal said.

"What charge?"

"Disturbing the peace. Packing your weapon on a public street."

"Arrest me," the outlaw challenged.

Now Wyatt Earp said, "We'll arrest you Curly, or kill you. Surrender to White, and go peacefully to jail."

"You're a U. S. deputy, not the town marshal; you got no right to horn in on this, Earp."

"White asked me to help him, so here I am. Surrender your gun and go to jail, Curly."

MORGAN EARP watched from in front of the Bird Cage. Fred Dodge, the Wells, Fargo secret-agent, stood down the street a few paces, also watching. From the insides of saloons, men and dance-hall harpies watched. Three men stood on that dusty rutted street, and danger was thick and menacing.

Curly Bill swung his eyes back to Marshal Fred White, who stood in front of him now. Curly Bill was in his middle twenties. He was a tall, well-built man with a thatch of curly, unruly hair. He had the devil's own sense of humor. This glinted in his dark eyes. He could be boyish and tricky when the occasion demanded, and this occasion fitted his character.

He knew he couldn't kill two men, not when one was a famous lawman. Evidently, he decided that the new town-marshal was the minor of the two men, so he spoke to Fred White.

"I'll go, marshal; here's my gun."

He extended his Colt .45, butt foremost, to the marshal. Maybe the darkness aided him. White reached for the gun, letting the tension run out of his wiry body. But he did not get the butt in his hand. Curly Bill shifted the gun rapidly, the barrel taking the place of the butt. Marshal White, probably not noticing this in the darkness, evidently not looking for a trick, found the barrel in his hand. He jerked at the Colt, and the jerk exploded it, for Curly Bill had his forefinger around the trigger.

There was a blinding roar. At such close range, the explosion of a .45 could set a man's clothing on fire. The bullet hit Marshal Fred White in the chest. He had, in effect, shot himself with Curly Bill's pistol!

The marshal staggered, dropped his weapon, and fell. But Curly Bill soon kissed the dust beside the lawman for Wyatt Earp's Buntline Special had come down and hit the outlaw on the side of his head, knocking

him cold beside the man he had tricked and had killed.

White was groaning, clutching his ribs. Blood was seeping through his fingers. But Curly Bill was sound asleep. By this time, Morgan Earp and Fred Dodge were in the street, and others had rushed out of saloons and gambling dens and stores and homes.

"He fell for an old, old trick," Morgan said. "Fred and I will take him back to the cabin. Jim, you run and get Doc Goodfellow."

"Doc is coming now, Morgan."

Wyatt was helping get the wounded man to his feet. White could not stand; he sagged in the middle. Morgan Earp got him across his shoulder and toted the wounded man to the cabin, not regarding the blood that was covering his own shirt.

"I'm staying on the street," Wyatt Earp said.

Sheriff Behan came puffing up. "You're under arrest," he told his old friend, Curly Bill, who of course, could not hear. Behan was placing a friend of his under arrest, but he had no other choice here in public.

Wyatt Earp could not help but smile. "You're kind of late, sheriff," he said. "You should have arrested him and the Clantons when they came into town, rode over the sidewalks, and did not check their pistols."

Behan said nothing. He went with Morgan Earp and the wounded man to the cabin. A deputy got Curly Bill to his feet and took him stumblingly to the jail. White died in a few hours but, before dying, he practically exonerated Curly Bill, saying that his jerk on the pistol's barrel had fired the pistol, thereby causing his wound. Curly Bill was soon released on bail and the charge dropped.

Morgan Earp, the man who was destined to succeed Marshal Fred White, watched and said nothing. Word came in that Wyatt had buffaloed Old Man Clanton, the gang leader, to the floor in a saloon. Morgan went to join his brother.

"White is dead," said Doc Goodfellow.

And so died the first marshal of roaring Tombstone.

★

2 Hard-Hitting Novelets

This gal called herself Estrelita, but I knew her when she was a peeler in Chi. So I went to renew old acquaintances — only somebody wanted to

KILL THE WENCH DEAD!

by H. C. Butler

Kirk Lowe liked brown-eyed gals, liked to find them in a spot where they needed him. But he hadn't counted on being the bait in a

BLONDE MANTRAP

by Wade D. Rubottom

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All he wanted was a square meal before he continued his flight, but Weary Morgan found that there was a lot more in the offing. And danged if this red-head wasn't enough to make a lazy man work, and a coward start making courageous gestures...

WEARY GOES A 'WOOING

by WILLIAM F. SCHWARTZ

WEARY MORGAN was down to his last ten dollars when he arrived in Grulla Junction. Being broke—or nearly broke—was no new experience for the young, red-haired, long-legged cowpoke; but, this time, he had added trouble—for the Law was after him.

A wan smile creased the homely features of Weary's freckled face when he considered the irony of it all. Why, he was nothing but a fugitive from a barbecue party!

Three days before, Weary, who had been without a job for four months, was wandering through the Stillwater Mountains when he came across two men roasting a calf over an open fire. Weary was hungry at the time, as always, and had invited himself as a guest at the feast. The two men had eyed him suspiciously when he rode up and their hands were near their guns. But when Weary had offered them two dollars for the privilege of dining with them, the two men relented, after first collecting the two dollars, and had invited Weary to help himself.

Weary was doing just that, helping himself to a big chunk of roasted calf, when suddenly the two men bolted from the fire and raced toward their horses, which were ground-hitched nearby.

"The Sheriff!" one of the men yelled back over his shoulder to Weary.

Weary took one look. A tall, lean man with a star on his chest was coming out of the brush on a buckskin. Nobody had to draw a picture for Weary; he knew, at once, what the trouble was. That calf that the two men were roasting had not been their own property. Weary ran for his mount, too.

Weary and the two men scattered in different directions. Weary still had the chunk of roasted calf in his hand as he spurred his sorrel for a fast getaway. He had paid two bucks for this piece of meat, he told himself; and he was going to eat it—Law or no Law. Anyway, if the sheriff caught him, it might be his last meal for a while. As it was, his belly had been practically empty for two days—and Weary loathed an empty belly.

Weary was giving his spurs to the sorrel and gnawing at the chunk of calf when he glanced back over his shoulder. Then he cursed aloud. The sheriff had had three choices to make when he decided which rider to follow; and, of course, with his usual luck, Weary saw that he was the one the sheriff had selected to chase.

There was no use, Weary decided, to

Turlington and his whole crew made the threat.

stop and try to explain to the lawman. What sheriff would believe his story? There was nothing to do but try to outdistance the starpacker, if he wanted to stay out of jail.

Weary finally lost the sheriff in the mountains. That was good. But what was bad was that he lost the chunk of roasted calf—and his hat—during the pursuit. He had accidentally dropped the meat; and the lawman had shot his hat from his head.

So Weary Morgan arrived in Grulla Junction without even a hat to cover his mop of flaming red hair; and his empty belly was muttering in hunger as he guided the sorrel down the dusty, wagon-rutted main street of the tiny cowtown.

IT WAS A helluva situation, Weary told himself. Ten bucks would never be enough for everything he needed. First, there was food to fill his aching belly. Then, a hat. Then coffee and beans and flour, if he wanted to push

on to add more and more distance between him and the starpacker.

He had an idea the sheriff was still on his trail. Hombres like that sheriff—a real old-fashioned lawman with a gray walrus mustache—would never give up that easy. Weary was painfully aware that the starpacker was still chasing him. The sheriff might be out of sight now, somewhere back in those mountains, but Weary was almost ready to bet the last ten bucks in his faded blue denims that the lawman was still following his trail.

But the hell with it! He was going to stop here in Grulla Junction and stuff some food into his empty belly, at least.

Weary's blue eyes swept the few wooden buildings that lined both sides of the main street of Grulla Junction. Finally, he saw what he wanted: A restaurant. Weary guided his sorrel to a tie-rail.

He took one final glance down the road in the direction whence he had entered Grulla Junction. He satisfied himself that the sheriff was not in sight as yet; then he walked into the restaurant. He was going to wrap himself around some steak, spuds, beans, coffee and apple pie, he promised himself, if it took his last dime.

But inside the restaurant, he saw nobody: No customers; no cook; nobody waiting on the counter. Weary winced, and his empty belly groaned again. The place, apparently, wasn't open for business. Clean plates and cups were piled in stacks behind the counter, but there was no food; there wasn't even the smell of cooking in the air.

Weary grew wrathful, indignant. Here he was, starving, with the law after him, and no prospect of a meal in view—even if he was willing to pay for one.

Weary pounded on the counter in bitter frustration. He raised his voice, yelled, "Cookie! Where are yuh? Where's everybody? I'm hungry—dammit! I want some food!" With angry strides, he headed toward a back room that looked like a kitchen.

And a redhaired girl came out to meet him. She looked as indignant as he was; her green eyes crackled in anger. "Stop that shouting!" she ordered. "Such language! Stop it! This minute!"

"But I'm hungry," Weary protested, a bit feebly, because he was suddenly cowed by her ire—and her beauty.

WEARY MORGAN always had an eye for a pretty girl, and this one was the prettiest he had ever seen. Deep green eyes, now blazing with wrath; a mass of curly hair as red as his own, a rounded face with a slightly tilted nose. There were freckles, too—only a few—but on her, they looked like beauty spots.

Weary's eyes wandered lower. He gawked at the twin mounds that shoved against the front of her blouse, at the rounded hips and thighs that filled a pair of tight-fitting denims to perfection.

Weary had been wandering through the mountains now for several months. She was the first human female he had seen in ages, so he could well appreciate a pair of denims that were filled so enticingly.

"Stop staring like that!" the girl commanded. There was a flush, he saw, in her cheeks that not only anger had put there. Weary lowered his eyes to the floor. He hadn't really meant to undress her with his eyes, he told himself; but, after all, he was only human and he hadn't been in the presence of a pretty girl for a long time.

"I'm hungry," he said again; this time, even more feebly. He was having a hard time averting his eyes from those well-filled denims.

"So you said!" she reminded, "but I'm afraid you're out of luck here. The place is closed for the day. Jennie—she's the woman who runs this

restaurant—she's ill. I just came in to tidy up for her a bit. And now I'm closing—so get out."

Weary sighed. "Is there," he asked, hopefully, "another eatin' place in town?"

Her answer disappointed him—and his empty belly.

"None," she said. "None at all. Now, if you'll leave, *please,* I'll lock up."

"But I'm hungry," Weary protested again.

"You said that before—remember?" she told him. Then suddenly she broke into a smile as her eyes swept his long, skinny frame. "You certainly do look as if you can stand a meal."

"I can!" Weary assured her, grinning. It looked as if the tension was broken. And he was happy—very happy—about it.

"Very well—then!" she said. "I know where you can earn a meal. There's some chores to be done at the ranch; some wood to chop. Come along with me. I'll see that you get a meal, but you'll have to work for it."

Weary sighed. He always had a strong dislike for work, especially menial chores like chopping wood. In fact, he was remembering, even his nickname had resulted from his distaste for hard labor. Once, years before, a ramrod he worked for had accused him of being lazy and Weary had declared, solemnly, "Honest, I ain't lazy. I'm just weary." From then on, he was known as "Weary" Morgan.

"Look," Weary told the red-haired girl. "I still got some money; I'm willin' to pay for food."

But she shook her head. "We don't sell meals at the ranch. But, as I said, you can work for one." She started for the door. "Come along if you feel like eating; I want to lock up before there's more disappointed customers."

Weary sighed again. He started to shake his head; he was in no mood to toil for grub, even though he was hungry—and not now, anyway, when the Law might arrive here in a couple of hours or so looking for him. But Weary had another view, even a better view, of how the red-haired girl filled out those denims when she walked past him, with her back turned, heading for the door. Weary sighed once more and followed her out the door like a lamb to slaughter.

"Me and a pretty face!" Weary grumbled silently to himself. "One look at a pretty face and I'm helpless!" Only, as he said it, he wasn't looking at her face.

Outside, the girl mounted a bay mare that was hitched near Weary's sorrel at the tie-rail. She and Weary were riding down the street when the girl introduced herself.

"I'm Judy Norse," she said. "My sister and I run the Circle N."

Weary nodded. "Pleased to meetcha!" As he talked, he alternated by gazing at her and admiring her beauty and glancing back over his shoulder for a possible sight of the sheriff. "The name's Morgan, Nathaniel Morgan; but folks just call me 'Weary.'" Then he thought of something. "This ain't a very big pile of wood, is it?"

She grinned at him. "Pretty big!"

Weary groaned—and his empty belly groaned, too. What a sucker! he cussed himself.

"WELL, THERE it is," Judy Norse said, "The Circle N—what's left of it."

Weary glanced at the ranch buildings, and was a little disappointed. The place looked rundown. Both the house and the barn were well-built but both appeared like they could stand much repair work, especially the roof on the barn.

"I'm afraid Marge and I haven't been doing too well," Judy confessed. "But it's hard for two sisters—alone—to run a ranch."

Weary eyed her, suspiciously. "You

mean, there's no menfolk here? You ain't got no Paw?"

Judy grew solemn; and Weary detected some momentary tears in her green eyes. "Dad was killed two years ago. He was ambushed, shot in the back out on the range. The killer was never caught."

"Sorry to hear it," Weary said. "But ain't you got no hired hands, neither?"

"None," Judy told him. "Marge and I haven't been able to hire any for the last six months. For one thing, we can't afford to pay the wages."

"It sounds like," Weary commented, "like you been havin' a hard time."

"We have," she said, "ever since Dad was—was murdered. First there was the debt on the property. We had to settle that when Dad died—and we had to sell most of the beefstock to do it. Then there was the drought last summer. We lost more cattle then. Yes," she admitted, "it's been pretty hard." Then she looked at him, "But why bother you with our troubles?"

Weary glanced at her, forced a grin in an effort to cheer her up. "Trouble," he told her, "comes natural to me. I'm used to it in big doses. I'd feel lonesome if I wasn't in trouble."

She smiled, a bit wanly. "Then welcome to the Circle N; you ought to feel at home here."

"Maybe I will," Weary said. "But I'm wonderin', though it's none of my business, why you and your sister don't sell out. There's good grazing land here and I saw a couple of good water holes on our way out here. Why not sell out, if it's too hard for you and your sister to manage things? Surely somebody ought to be willin' to buy."

At that, he saw her jaws go firm. "That," she informed him, with unusual bluntness, "will be the last thing we'll do—sell out!"

"But why?" he wanted to know.

SHE LOOKED at him and her green eyes were serious. "You're right," she began. "There is good grazing land here—plenty of it! And it's well-watered, too. The northern fringe of the range even touches White River. There's plenty of good water there. And I've had offers to sell, too, but the offers come from a man I loathe. His name's Jeff Turlington. He's been buying up range land in these parts for years; I've heard he's been boasting that he'll get the Circle N, one way or the other."

"Then why not sell if he offers a fair price?"

Judy shook her head. "You don't understand. I said my father was killed—murdered. I can't prove it, I know, but I'm sure Turlington killed him—or had one of his hired gunmen do it. I told you Marge and I can't afford to pay hands; that's right. But that's not the only reason why we can't employ any help. There were times—not many in the past year or so, I'll admit—when Marge and I pinched and saved until we had enough money to hire a rider or two. But what always happened? I'll tell you what! Turlington came with his gunfighters after them. He didn't kill any of my riders, but he scared them off. He told them it wasn't healthy to work for the Circle N—not when he, Turlington, wanted us to go dead broke so we'd have to sell to him."

Weary sighed; he was in for more trouble again. The girl hadn't asked for his help, only to chop some wood in exchange for a meal. But he knew, although he never hankered to be a hero, that he'd feel lower than a rattlesnake's belly if he rode off and left the Circle N without trying to help her in some way. Especially since she was such a shapely redhead; Weary had a strong attachment for shapely redheads.

Weary spoke, without really weighing his words. "Sounds like a real nice gent, this Turlington; I'd like to meet him." Then he added, "Miss Judy, if you're lookin' fer a rider—a lazy, good-fer-nuthin' rider—well, yuh got one—me."

He was being a sucker again, he told himself. But the grateful look that leaped into Judy's eyes was enough reward for him at the moment.

"You mean, that you want to hire on here, work for Marge and me?"

"I do."

"But I told you we can't afford the wages!"

He grinned. "Just keep me in grub; that'll be enough."

"And you're not afraid of Turlington—and his gunfighters?"

WEARY GULPED; of course, he was afraid. He didn't relish the idea of stacking up against a gang of gunslingers. He wasn't exactly slow with a .45 himself, he knew; but he had never made a living at it, had never worked for gunfighter's wages. He was never that foolish, he reminded himself, to hire out as a man with a gun. The occupation was just too dad-blasted dangerous.

"We'll worry about Turlington later," Weary told her, with a conviction he didn't feel. "Right now, I'm interested only in some grub." And that last statement, his empty belly assured him, was no lie.

But then, suddenly, something else hit him. For the moment, he had forgotten about the lawman who was dogging at his heels. What was worse, he asked himself—stacking up against a gang of gunfighters or going to jail? He had a poor choice. Neither prospect appealed to him. But he shrugged his shoulders; for a while, at least, he would enjoy the company of an enticing redhead.

"Let's go!" he urged Judy; "I'm hungry!"

Weary Morgan could never remember when he had eaten a more pleasant dinner. At times, he felt like a sucker again and thoughts of "The condemned man ate a hearty meal!" whirled through his brain. But, on the whole, it was a delightful experience dining with the Norse sisters.

There was plenty of food—fried chicken, spuds, beans, greens, coffee and apple pie. Weary ate as only a starved man can eat—besides, he had been known for years for his big appetite. "I don't know where yuh put it all!" More than one bunkhouse cook had complained. And people had marveled how a man could stow away so much grub and still look like an underfed scarecrow.

But it wasn't only the food. No! It was being served by such beautiful creatures as the Norse sisters.

Marge Norse, Weary discovered, bore no resemblance to her sister in looks. But she was a beauty, too; Marge was a tall, willowly blonde with a profile like the woman Weary had once seen on a wealthy rancher's wife's cameo brooch. Marge Norse, Weary was aware, was the kind of woman who would inspire a poet to write poetry. But Weary was no poet; and, personally, he preferred Judy. Judy was more pert and had more meat, very shapely meat, on her bones.

Weary sighed with happiness as he downed his third piece of apple pie. This was living, he told himself. But how long, a voice inside mocked him, would he be living after Turlington found out he was here?

Finally, with reluctance, Weary left the kitchen table. He went outside, sharpened an axe that Judy found for him in the barn and went to work on the wood pile. He swung the axe with a vigor that surprised himself.

WEARY'S ARMS were sore from unaccustomed labor that night, but his happiness knew no bounds. He slept that night in a soft bed in the ranch house. *Imagine me,* his happy brain sang out, *sleeping in the same house with two beautiful women!* But that mocking inner voice taunted him again, gave him a mental kick in the slats. *As soon as Turlington finds out you're here,* the mocking voice jibed, *maybe*

you'll be sleeping six feet below the daisies.

There was plenty of work to do at the Circle N, Weary soon learned, and Weary had always hated work. But with the Norse sisters—especially Judy—there to encourage him, he became a new man almost. He labored and toiled from sunup to sundown.

"You're working too hard," Marge told him one day after he had spent hours repairing the windmill. "Why don't you take a rest?"

Weary sighed. "I never thought anybody would ever tell me I worked too hard," he said. Then he looked at Judy, who was passing by on her way to feed the chickens. How snug Judy's denims fitted her! Weary drooled to himself. Then he added, aloud, "Maybe I just ain't had no inspiration before!"

Marge smiled, teased, "I think she likes you, too, Weary."

Weary sighed, looked around for another chore to do. He was content with the world. The way he felt at the moment, he was ready to face ten Jeff Turlingtons and a hundred gunslingers.

And, all too soon, Weary did face Jeff Turlington and his gunfighters.

One afternoon, Judy and Weary rode out on the range together. The object was to repair fences, but Weary had other objects in mind, too. Out on the range, he would be alone with Judy. He began to plan schemes the moment they saddled their mounts; and he dreamed delightful dreams.

But they were barely a half-hour's ride from the ranch house when they spotted three riders approaching. Weary saw Judy's face grow flush with anger.

"That's Turlington and two of his men," Judy told Weary; and Weary felt his happiness ooze from him. Too abruptly, his dream was threatening to develop into a nightmare.

Judy had courage, Weary saw; plenty of it. She didn't hesitate a moment. "Come on!" she urged. "They're on our land; I won't stand for it!" She kicked her mare in the ribs with her spurless boots, headed straight for Turlington and his men. Reluctantly, Weary found himself trailing in her wake on his sorrel.

Judy rode up to Turlington. "I warned you before," she said, "to stay off my land with your gunslingers."

Turlington smiled, showed even white teeth. He was a handsome man in his early forties. He had black hair, graying at the temples. He wore a black suit, a white shirt and a black string tie. He was mounted on a tall chestnut. "Such temper!" Turlington mocked. "I was only coming over to give you an offer—one last offer for the Circle N."

Judy glared at him. "It's useless, and you know it! Keep your offers, and get off my land!"

Turlington laughed, then regarded Weary with stony brown eyes. "And who's this jasper? A new hand? Well, we'll get rid of him, like all the rest." He sneered at Weary. "What's the matter, pilgrim? Tired of livin'? Or didn't Miss Norse here tell you how I feel about her hired hands?"

WEARY GLANCED at Turlington; then at the two men who rode with him. All three had their hands close to the .45's at their sides. He was in a tight spot, Weary realized; three guns against one. He felt a little sick inside.

But then Weary saw Judy watching him quietly, wondering, no doubt, how he would react. Judy's presence gave Weary a courage he didn't exactly feel; he didn't want to look like a scared polecat with her around.

So Weary said, "She told me all right, Turlington; she told me how you've been scarin' off her hands. But me," he added; and he felt like a fool when he said it, "you ain't scarin' me none, Turlington. I'm stayin' right here at the Circle N. And, like Judy says, maybe you three hombres better get off our grass."

Turlington threw back his head and

roared with laughter. "Listen to him, boys! The long drink of water tryin' to talk big and brave." Then his eyes grew deadly. "Listen, *you,*" he said to Weary, "I'll give you two days—get it!—*two days* to get out of here! Two days from now, if you're not gone from these parts, me and my men will be comin' after yuh!" He turned to his riders and laughed again. "Let's go, fellers. We ain't welcome around here." Then he threw one parting order at Weary as the chestnut started off. "Remember! Two days!"

"Aw! Let's plug him now!" Weary heard one of Turlington's riders suggest. "Why wait two days? Let's get it over now."

Weary glared at the rider. He dreaded a gunfight, but he was ready to go for his gun.

But the rider, Weary saw, had nothing but mirth in his eyes and in his face. The rider wasn't pushing a fight just yet; he was merely poking fun.

"No, Joe," Turlington said. He had a wide grin on his handsome face. "Give him a chance to see the light. He'll get out of here, Joe, like all the rest."

The rider called Joe laughed long and hard. Then he started up his mount, followed his boss.

WEARY WATCHED them ride away, the three of them. Even now, he could hear their guffaws. Turlington and his men, he told himself, just had a very comical time at his expense. And Weary didn't like it, not one bit. He hated to be laughed at in front of Judy. Weary felt a slow rage creep into him. Next time he met that bunch, he promised himself, they wouldn't laugh.

Then Weary grew aware that Judy was talking to him.

"And you'll go?" Judy asked.

"Like hell I will!" Weary told her; and, this time, he meant what he said.

"But you'd better go!" she told him, and he saw tears forming in her eyes. "Turlington has too much power, too many gunslingers in his gang. You'd better go! I'm sorry I brought you into this!"

Weary looked at her, hardly knowing what to say. Then he grew conscious of something else. Their mounts had drifted together and he could feel his knee touching hers.

"You really want me to go?" he probed. He applied pressure with his knee; and he was overjoyed, forgot all that menaced him, when she didn't pull her knee away. "I don't want to go, Judy."

"And I don't want to see you killed," she said.

He reached out. His long arms circled her waist. Somehow, he felt like an idiot, a silly jackass, wanting to make love at a time like this. But if he was going to die, he told himself, he might as well die happy. "I won't go, Judy, if you want me to stay."

"Then stay," she said. She lifted her face to his. "But don't be killed!" She looked as if she wanted to say more, but Weary stopped her words with kisses. And she didn't resist.

In a moment, they were off their horses. And Weary forgot that he was broke, that a sheriff was after him, that his life was in danger if he stayed around these parts. He concerned himself only with the task at hand, making love to a shapely redhead.

"Well, the two days are up," Judy Norse said. She was serving breakfast —after a few preliminary kisses—to Weary Morgan.

"Yeah!" Weary replied dully. He was torn between two emotions. Life, he had long since decided, was heavenly here on the Circle N with Judy. *But how long would this life last?* his inner voice was mocking him. This was the day he was supposed to clear out of these parts or Turlington and his gunfighters would come after him.

"Maybe you'd better go," Judy suggested, "while you still have a

chance." But, as she spoke, her body was close to his; and he could feel the firm roundness of her. At the moment, Weary was aware, not even a team of horses could drag him from the spot.

Weary stood up, pressed her to him, planted a kiss on her lips. "I don't go anywhere!" he told her, fervently.

"Except maybe into town," Marge Norse said, coming into the kitchen. "We're low on supplies; we need sugar, coffee, flour. Do you think you two lovebirds could go into Grulla Junction for them? Or should I go?" Then she considered the matter. "No; maybe I better go. If one of Turlington's men sees you in town, there might be trouble."

Weary looked at her. He was dizzy from Judy's kisses. "No. *We'll* go," he said, surprising himself with his courage. "I'll have to face Turlington sooner or later; it might as well be now."

THE TRIP into Grulla Junction in a wagon with Judy by his side was a journey of delight for Weary Morgan. More than once on the way to town, Weary dropped the reins and let the horses find their own way while he concerned himself with making love to Judy. But, finally, Grulla Junction hove into sight and Weary found some of his new-found courage slipping from him. What he would meet in Grulla Junction, he wasn't sure. But it was certain to be trouble—in its usual big doses. They were both armed. Weary had his .45, and Judy wore a .38 that she insisted she knew how to use. But, inside, Weary was uncertain how he would react when he faced Turlington and his gunfighters again.

Weary Morgan was very wary as they entered Grulla Junction. His eyes swept the planked sidewalks carefully. He was searching for two men in particular, Jeff Turlington and the sheriff who had chased him through the mountains. He hoped, fervently, that neither of them would be in town that day.

But they both were. And Weary saw them, almost simultaneously.

Three men on horseback came riding into town from the opposite direction as Weary was guiding the team toward a tie-rail in front of the Mercantile.

"There's Turlington!" Judy warned. "And two of his men!"

Weary looked; his heart started to pound in his chest when he saw that Turlington had spotted them, too, and was heading straight for the wagon.

Then Weary saw somebody else. And his heart almost jumped into his mouth. The sheriff with the walrus mustache was coming out of the Mercantile!

"Hey you!" the sheriff shouted; and Weary, unable to restrain himself, leaped from the wagon.

Weary started down the street. Flight was his only objective; he didn't want the sheriff to corner him, he didn't want to go to jail for a couple of bites of roasted calf.

But suddenly it dawned on him! How it must look to Judy! To her, he knew, it appeared as though he were running away from Turlington and not the sheriff. She had no way of knowing that the sheriff was after him. And, anyway, in fleeing from the sheriff, he was headed straight for Turlington and his men.

WEARY STOPPED in his tracks. There was nothing to do but fight, especially, since Turlington and his men already had their guns out. Weary yanked at his .45. Then he flattened himself on the planked walk as bullets whizzed past his ears.

Weary hugged the boards of the sidewalk. There, he knew, his skinny body formed a poor target for Turlington and his men on their galloping horses. Then he saw the sheriff come running up the street; the lawman was crouched low, his .45 spitting flame and smoke.

Weary groaned aloud. Here—for sure—was trouble in big doses. No

only did he have to fight Turlington and his gunnies. But the sheriff, too!

Weary ducked low, while the roar of gunfire filled the narrow street.

And, hastily, Weary made a decision. He'd surrender to the sheriff! It would be better that way. Better to go to jail alive! That was much better than a plot of ground in Boothill! That's all Turlington wanted to give him; not a nice home in a cell like the sheriff wanted to hand out.

Weary stood up, started to lift his hands.

But a voice shouted at him. "Get down!" A girl's voice. Judy's. She was out of the wagon, standing in the street. She had her .38 in her hand; it was smoking.

Weary flattened himself again. This time, he landed in the dusty street. Bullets buzzed over his head like a swarm of angry bees.

But, still, he couldn't keep his head down. He raised it, looked. And he almost keeled over with shock and surprise.

He was in the center of the gunfire all right, but nobody was shooting at him!

Instead, the sheriff was having it out with Turlington and his men, and already one of Turlington's gunnies was off his horse, was lying lifeless in the street. The sheriff was wounded, too; his left shoulder was wet with blood. But that wasn't all. Judy was in the thick of the fight, and her .38 was pouring lead at Turlington.

That was too much—even for Weary. He jumped up, ignoring the bullets that swept past him. He fired once, sent Turlington spinning off his horse. It was a lucky shot, Weary realized, but it did the trick. Turlington lost his gun and the remaining rider threw up his hands, begged for mercy. And, suddenly, there was no more shooting.

Judy came running up to Weary. She grabbed him in her arms. "Are you all right?" she pleaded.

Weary gulped. "Sure!" he told her. He wanted to say more, but he saw the sheriff struggling with Turlington. Both men were wounded, but they were clubbing away at each other with their fists.

What is this? Weary wondered, but he joined the fistfight on the sheriff's side. Weary swung his right, with all the power he had in it, and Turlington went down. Out cold. Meanwhile, Judy kept her .38 trained on Turlington's man who had surrendered.

And Weary looked at the man who sat on his horse with upraised hands. It was the gunny called Joe, the one who had laughed so long and hard at Weary two days before out on the range. The one who had jokinginly suggested to Turlington to plug Weary on the spot. Joe wasn't laughing now, and he didn't laugh when Weary dragged him off his horse, planted a swift kick in the seat of his denims.

"That's fer bein' a laughin' boy!" Weary told him. Weary was the one, now, who was laughing, long and hard.

THEN HE saw the sheriff. The sheriff was regarding him with a strange look in his eyes. The laughter died on Weary's lips.

"There's a little matter of a stolen calf," the sheriff began.

Weary made haste to explain his story. How he had paid two bucks for a meal and wound up being chased by the Law over a couple of mountains.

"Honest, sheriff!" Weary pleaded. "I didn't know that calf was stolen; and I was hungry!"

The sheriff grinned a little. "Well, yuh sure looked hungry. I ain't never seen nobody skinnier than you. And maybe I should forget about the calf, son. After all, yuh brought me luck."

"Luck?" Weary said, puzzled. "I ain't never brought nobody any luck."

"But yuh did me," the sheriff said. With his boot, he nudged Turlington, who was now stirring in the dust of the street. "Here's a man I really

wanted, son, far more than I wanted you. Yuh see, son, I've been sheriff for over twenty years—and this here." he touched Turlington with his toe again, "is the first killer that ever got away from me."

"This here varmint," the sheriff continued, "murdered a man back in my county about ten years ago. I had little hopes of findin' him after all that time. But in chasin' you, son, yuh led me right to him. So yuh brought me luck. Thanks."

"You're very welcome," Weary said. He was quite content now; the sheriff seemed willing to forget about the calf, and Turlington was no threat to him any more. "But what happened?" he wanted to know. "I was too busy duckin' bullets. When I heard yuh holler, I thought yuh was after me."

"I was, son," the sheriff admitted. "I was after yuh—at first. The second I saw yuh on the wagon, I recognized yuh. I yelled at yuh but yuh started to run. Then them hombres started shootin'. The little lady here." he nodded at Judy, "started shootin', too. And one of them varmints shot back at her—actually fired at a woman! That was too much for me; I got into it, too." The sheriff pointed to the lifeless gunny on the ground. "That's the one I went after first. He's the one that shot at the little lady. Then Turlington and me recognized each other. And then the shootin' got general. Turlington's the one that wounded me."

Weary turned to Judy, swept her into his arms.

"And I was runnin' because I didn't want to go to jail. Judy, can you ever forgive me? You might have been hurt."

"But I wasn't," she said. Then she turned to the sheriff. "You say Turlington's a killer. Maybe he killed my father, too; my father was murdered two years ago." Then she whirled on Joe, menaced him with her .38. "And maybe you helped him!"

"I didn't, lady!" Joe protested. He was a thoroughly beaten man now. "It was Turlington; he did it alone. He bragged about it afterwards, said we was too yellow to do it—so he did it himself."

JUDY AND Weary started back to the Circle N that afternoon with the praise of the people of Grulla Junction ringing in their ears. Weary's back still ached from being slapped so soundly by grateful citizens. "You did it, boy!" they told him. "Your gun brought Turlington down. You're a hero, boy! You rid this town of a varmint we all hated. We'll have peace here now that the reign of Turlington and his mob is ended."

Weary could still hear their words. They echoed, hollowly, in his ears. He should be happy, he knew, but he wasn't. Because his conscience was jeering at him, reminding him how scared he had been ever since Judy had told him about Turlington. He had lived a big lie! he told himself, ever since he came to the Circle N. A coward had posed as a brave man, and that coward was Weary Morgan. For the first time in his life, Weary was completely ashamed, conpletely disgusted with himself. Finally, he could stand it no longer. He turned to Judy.

"Judy," he began, "I ain't no hero. I was as scared as a jackrabbit today when all that lead was flyin'. I didn't want to fight Turlington and his gang. All I wanted to do, when I saw the sheriff, was to beat it—so I wouldn't have to go to jail. And that ain't all Judy; there's more. I didn't hang around here to protect you from Turlington and his mob. I just stayed because—because—oh, hell!—because I liked the sight of you, walkin' around in them tight denims. I'm a coward. Judy, not a hero. I'm nuthin' but a lazy saddle-tramp. I can't even hold a

job. So, I guess, when we get to your spread, I'll get my sorrel and start ridin'. I guess I better go; I hope yuh see what I mean."

"Yes," she said. "I guess I see what you mean."

Then she was silent.

Weary sighed. It was all over! But what did he expect? What did he deserve?

Then she spoke again, and Weary almost fell off the wagon at what she said.

"I think you're a brave man, Weary," she told him. "And an honest one."

He gulped.

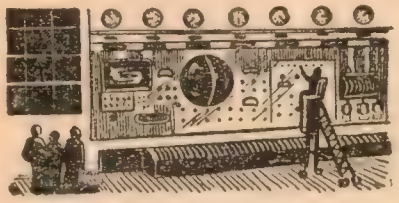
"Huh!"

"Yes, a brave man, Weary. Not many men would have the courage—or the honesty—to tell me what you just told me." She looked up at him. "I'm not blind, Weary. I could see how you hated work when I told you about that woodpile. But you chopped the wood, and you worked harder around the ranch than I ever saw a man work in my whole life. So you're not lazy. And, now, with Turlington out of the way, maybe we can make a go of it with the Circle N. For one thing, Weary. You're not lazy; you just think you are."

Weary sighed. He felt better now. His mind wandered back to those tight denims. "Maybe I had some inspiration here," Weary said, grinning. "Maybe that's why I worked so hard."

She looked at him again. And her eyes held promise. "Stick around. Weary," she said, "if you want to be inspired."

★



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★ B is for Bullet ★

by Harold Gluck

FOR SIX days and seven consecutive nights, the band of defenders had been fighting. Though outnumbered fifty to one they had refused to surrender; their commander, Colonel Cuchran had given a simple order to each one.

"Make every bullet count. If you shoot two men with one bullet, I'll reward you. When you run out of ammunition you will use your guns as clubs. I want you to go down fighting, and with your boots on."

Private John McCloney was willing; but since he didn't have any boots on, he was a bit puzzled.

"What do I do? Die in bare feet?" he asked Frank Lovejoy, who was covering the fight for the big city paper.

"We'll raise a collection and get you a pair of boots," suggested the reporter.

The end came quickly and rather unexpectedly. Fatigue had set in and the bodies of the men could take no more. Colonel Cuchran merely closed his eyes. "Just want to get forty winks," was all he said.

The soldiers did the same. And when General Jose Ventura Y Banvana called for the final charge, he was surprised at what he found. "Are they dead?" he asked his orderly.

"Quien sabe?" was the sensible answer.

The soldiers were all taken prisoners and they knew their fate.

"You will all be shot at sunrise," explained the General. And then as an afterthought, he added, "Of course if it is cloudy, there will be a slight delay of at least twenty four hours."

Frank Lovejoy had demanded he be brought to the General's tent. There he explained his own situation. "I am a reporter and write a column about guns. My paper sent me here to cover the fighting. You have my credentials. Release me at once."

The General did not like the man's attitude. It was evident he was dealing with a Yankee. "I am the greatest authority on guns," said the General. "And I can find out at once whether you are a reporter or a spy. I shall give you a simple test. Be seated, senor."

The reporter sat on a hard packing case. The General handed him a sheet of paper and a pen.

"In Column A," began General Jose Ventura Y Banvana, "you will find ten sentences. In Column B you will find fourteen words. Ten of these fourteen words are really the definition of each of those ten sentences. Match them and I'll see how much you really know about guns."

"What's in it for me?" demanded the reporter with the mercenary touch in his soul.

"Get all of them right," replied the General, "and you can have my job. Get eight or nine right, and you can have half of Texas. Get seven right and I'll spare those men and send them back home to fight me another day. Get six right and you become my orderly. Any mark below that, and you are a fake. If you want it in terms of percentages, make it ten percent for each correct answer."

You take the test and see how you would make out, and what would have happened to you had you been Frank Lovejoy. Answers are on page 92.

★

Column A	Column B
——1. A metal cam inside a rifle receiver against which a fired cartridge case is struck and thrown clear of the weapon.	Windage
——2. The inside diameter of a gun barrel.	Bullet
——3. The small cup shaped metal forging on the lockplate of a flintlock arm which is used to hold the priming powder.	Rifling
——4. A series of spiral grooves cut in the bore of a barrel which impart a spin to the bullet.	Colt
——5. The earliest recorded form of a flintlock.	Primer
——6. The study which treats the various forces and motions of moving projectiles.	Caliber
——7. A cutaway section of a muzzle loading rifle buttstock which is fitted with a hinged cover and used to carry patches and other accouterments.	Sights
——8. A small charge of sensitive explosive used to detonate a larger and less sensitive amount of explosive.	Ejector
——9. The rear end of a gun barrel.	Pan
——10. A missle fired from a gun.	Velocity
	Breech
	Snaphance
	Ballistics
	Patch Box.

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LONELY GUNS

by Harlan Clay

It leads off the December issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

Suddenly Mason's neighbor was saying, "You'll do a little favor for a friend. You'll tell the sheriff you held up the bank." And when Mason showed fight, Lem Crawford added, "You'll do it — because your son is missing, and he won't be found until you do!"

HOSTAGE OF THE OWLHOOT

by DONALD BAYNE HOBART

THE NIGHT wind blew cold against Mason's face as he drew open the front door. Beyond the wagon road the Montana hills were lonely in the starlight. There could be heavy snow before morning.

"You find the boy yet?" Crawford loomed large in the shadows of the ranchhouse porch, a big man with a soft voice. "Heard Jimmy was missing

when I got back to my place this evening. Rode over to see if there's anything I can do."

"Thanks, Lem." Mason stepped back, casting a thin shadow on the wall of the hall. "Come in. We haven't found him. Been missing since sundown yesterday. Seems like even a nine-year-old boy would be able to find his way back home unless—" The words drifted away as Mason stood there, stooped with weariness in the yellow glow of the lamp.

Crawford stepped into the hall, closing the door gently behind him. Mason found himself listening—finding it strange the house was so still. Then he realized Martha had stopped sobbing.

"No trace of him at all?" Crawford asked.

"Found the little pinto pony we gave him last Christmas five miles over south this morning." Mason's blue eyes were bleak with things he didn't want to believe. "There was a little blood on the saddle." He turned and led the way into the little room Jimmy called his Dad's office. "In here, Lem. Don't want Martha to hear us talking and get hopeful."

"All right, Adam." Crawford followed Mason into the room. "I don't want your wife to hear us talking, either."

Mason stared at him, finding something strange in the way the big man said it. It was odd about Lem Crawford. He was a quiet sort of man, slow to smile, and what most folks in this region didn't rightly consider too friendly. Ran a little ranch over east, and had good stock, though not much of it. Mason had never known him well. Still his coming here tonight to ask about the boy seemed right neighborly.

"Sit down, Adam." Crawford nodded to a chair behind the old flat-topped desk. "You're going to hate me all the rest of your life for what I'm going to say, but that can't be helped."

Mason sank down into the chair and sat there staring at the gun in the holster on Crawford's right thigh. He wondered why he was suddenly so terribly frightened it almost made him physically sick. Yet he knew he had to say something. Crawford stood there waiting and watching for just that.

"Hate you, Lem?" Mason said. "Why?"

"Sometimes a man gets in such a tight place he just don't care what he does," said Crawford slowly. "So desperate he'll ride roughshod over anyone and everyone in his way. I've got your boy, Adam. And—"

"What!" Mason half rose from his chair, then sank back as he saw Crawford's hand drop to the butt of his gun. "If—if anything has happened to Jimmy I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"The boy is all right. He'll be returned to you unharmed provided you do a friend a favor."

"A friend!" The contempt in Mason's voice was a hard and biting thing. "My wife and I have had nearly—well, I don't know how many hours of worry and terror about the boy, and you talk about being a friend. Why you—"

"Calm down." Crawford's voice was as chill as the wind outside. "If you ever want to see your son alive again, you'll do just what I say."

"What's that?"

"You'll go to Sheriff Ward and confess you are the man who robbed the bank in Black Rock the day before yesterday."

"If I do, Ward will think I'm drunk or crazy or both. What reason would I have for robbing banks? The Bar M is doing all right, and I've got money in the bank. You talk like a fool, Crawford."

"Do I? Forgot to tell you. When I found Jimmy, last night, he had evidently been knocked from his saddle by the low branch of a tree, after his

little pinto had run away. He cut his arm and hurt his head—"

"Where is he now?" Mason got swiftly to his feet. "Take me to him. We've got to get Jimmy to a doctor at once."

FOR A MOMENT Crawford hesitated, then he nodded. "All right, Adam. I—I just can't go through with it. If you'll forget what I've told you I'll take you to the boy. He's safe enough at—at my ranch. Keeps asking for his mother and dad. I'm worried about him."

"It's a deal," said Mason quickly; "I won't say anything, if I get Jimmy back safe." He walked to the door. "I'll tell Martha you think you know where the boy might be, then saddle up and we'll get riding."

"All right," said Crawford resignedly as they stepped into the hall. "Hurry up. I'll be waiting out front."

The front door closed behind Lem Crawford as Mason hurried up the stairs to the second floor. Martha was lying on the big double bed. She just stared at him—the ghost of what had been a pretty woman the day before yesterday.

"Heard you talking to someone downstairs," she said weakly. "Did they—"

"Not yet. Lem Crawford is here. Thinks he knows where we might find Jimmy." Mason frowned as he walked over and kissed her cheek. "Don't raise your hopes too high; I'll be back soon as I can make it, honey."

"I'll be waiting," Martha said softly. "And—and praying."

Mason got his hat and sheeplined coat, then buckled on his shellbelt; the gun in the holster would kill a man before this night was over if Crawford tried to trick him.

He went downstairs and out the back way. The bunkhouse was dark. The men in the outfit were sleeping, worn out from twenty-four hours of searching for the boy. Funny, the things you think about at a time like this. Didn't seem natural for the pinto to have run away—the pony was right gentle.

On the bench beside the bunkhouse door a figure stirred as Mason headed for the harness shed to get his rigging.

"That you, Boss?"

Dan Lancing, the old foreman who had forgotten more about cattle than Adam Mason had ever known. A man who was loyal to the brand, and fond of the boy.

"Crawford around front," Mason said. "Thinks he might know where Jimmy is now. I'm riding with him."

"Me, too," said Lancing.

Mason thought fast. Crawford wouldn't like the foreman riding with them. Might even refuse to take them to his ranch. This was a job a man had to do alone.

"Rather you didn't, Dan," Mason said. "Like to know you were here in case Mrs. Mason wants something."

"Just as you say, Boss." There was nothing in Lancing's voice to show what he really thought. "I'll stick around."

IN A FEW minutes Mason had a horse roped, saddled and ready. Lancing again sat on the bench in front of the bunkhouse. He could see windows of the upstairs bedroom at the rear of the house, but he wouldn't sit there long in the chill wind.

Mason rode around front. Crawford sat his saddle waiting, impatience with him now.

"Took you long enough." The bite in his soft voice made the delay a personal matter. "It's cold waiting."

"Sorry," Mason said. "Let's go."

They rode on out through the ranch yard, not pressing their horses. It was five miles from the Bar M to Crawford's C In A Box. No use wearing out their mounts for no good reason,

particularly as Crawford's bay seemed right tuckered out.

"I guess you been wondering why," Crawford said as they rode side by side. "About robbing the bank, I mean."

"Haven't given it much thought; I'm more worried about the boy."

"He'll be all right."

They reached the main road leading east before either of them spoke again.

"Had to do it," Crawford said. "Got gambling with some hardcases in a town south of here. 'Fore I knew it I was in too deep. Signed an I. O. U. for ten thousand, with the understanding if I didn't pay off by tomorrow I'd lose the C In A Box."

"You sure play for high stakes," Mason said dryly.

"Too high. I was drunk and a fool; couldn't raise the money so I robbed the bank."

"Wonder you didn't take the cash and light out of this part of the country."

Mason was only half listening. Was Jimmy hurt bad? Had to get the boy to the doctor in town just as soon as possible. That was all that really mattered. Good thing he hadn't told Martha the boy was injured.

"Couldn't leave." Crawford's voice seemed part of the moaning of the wind. "If I disappeared, the sheriff would be suspicious. Might figure I was the bank robber. Besides that way I might lose the ranch."

Suddenly the big man's gun covered Mason. His eyes were mean in the light of the stars. "Now what?" Mason asked.

"Don't like you wearing a gun," Crawford said; "drop it down on the road, Mason."

"All right." Mason didn't like the look in Crawford's eyes. A dead father wouldn't be much help to a boy who needed him badly. "Just as you say."

He drew the .45 from the holster. It hit the road with a thump that mingled with the thudding of the horses' hoofs.

"That's better." Crawford relaxed and holstered his gun. "I guess you think I'm a bit crazy, Mason."

"Haven't said so yet."

Mason glanced up at the sky. A huge gray blanket was slowly blotting out the stars. There would be snow before morning. Maybe sooner than that.

The two men lapsed into silence. To Mason the passing miles seemed endless. He had time to think, to hate Lem Crawford as he had never hated anyone before in his life. Most times it just hadn't been worth the bother.

That Crawford had taken the boy and was holding him as some sort of weird hostage was something Mason couldn't forgive or forget. The long hours of waiting, hoping and searching were still too fresh and searing to forget easily. The lost look in Martha's eyes when there was no news all last night, and all day today still haunted Adam Mason. Maybe it always would; he couldn't be sure of that now.

THEN FINALLY, after the two riders had turned off the main road and were heading across a stretch of rangeland there were buildings looming ahead.

"No one at the ranch but the boy," Crawford said. "Only have three men working for me. Sent them out to the line camp yesterday to check on my stock before winter sets in. Won't be back for a week or so. They were gone when I brought the boy home."

"And you left him all alone tonight," Mason said bitterly. "Jimmy's only nine. Sometimes kids get scared when they're by themselves in a strange place, specially if they're hurt."

"He's all right," Crawford said. "That boy of yours doesn't scare easy."

They left their horses in the barn,

out of the wind and cold but still saddled and ready. Crawford led the way into the one story ranchhouse by the back way. Mason was glad to see there was an oil lamp burning in the kitchen and the living room beyond. The place sure looked like a bachelor lived here. None of the little touches a wife brought to it to make a house a home.

"That you, Mr. Crawford?" Jimmy's voice, a bit shaky, but much stronger than Mason had hoped it would be. "Mr. Crawford?"

"I'm here, Jimmy," Crawford called.

Then the boy was standing in the doorway of the bedroom. Tow-headed, blue-eyed, and looking so strangely small in his flannel shirt, levis and boots. His eyes widened, and his face looked like it did at Christmas time when he saw his father beside Crawford.

"Oh, Dad!" Jimmy said. "Gosh, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, Son." Mason gave the boy a quick hug, searching for the head wound with his eyes and not finding it. "Are you all right, Jimmy?"

"Sure, Dad. I just cut my wrist a little on a rock yesterday afternoon." The boy drew away and looked anxiously at his father. "Hope you and Mother aren't mad at me for not getting home before this."

"No, Jimmy." Mason stared at Crawford. "We're not mad at you." Then to the big man. "So the head injury was another of your lies, Crawford."

"Don't be mad at Mr. Crawford, Dad," said Jimmy. "He's been very good to me; besides he's your friend when you're in such bad trouble."

"What trouble, Jimmy?"

"He—he told me." Jimmy nodded to Crawford. "About—about you robbing the bank and—and all." Jimmy's lip trembled, as a boy's will when he learns his idol has feet of clay. "Of course we won't tell Mother."

"Why you—" Mason stepped toward the big man with fists clenched.

"Now, Adam, calm down." Crawford's voice was soft, but his right hand was too close to the butt of his gun. "If you get too excited, someone might really get hurt. You wouldn't like that."

"No." Mason halted and stood motionless. "I wouldn't like that at all."

"Gosh, that's better, Dad." Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought you were going to beat up Mr. Crawford like you did that man who insulted Mother that time."

"Don't be silly, Jimmy," said Crawford. "Your father is just nervous and excited. He knows I'm his friend. That's why I brought him here so he could hide out from the Law."

"I know," said Jimmy. "That's why you brought me here, so Dad would come after me. You told me that last night, Mr. Crawford. You said Dad might light out of the country, unless he thought I was missing, and would stay to try and find me."

"Of course," said Crawford. "That's it."

"NICE TO know you're such a good friend, Lem." Mason sank into a chair. He was tired, and not thinking too clearly. Crawford certainly had planned the whole thing care-

fully. Even had the boy believing the worst of his father.

"Do you really have to hide, Dad?" Jimmy asked. "Couldn't you tell the sheriff the truth? I—I can take care of Mother and the ranch while you—while you're in jail. Dan Lancing will help us."

"You're right, Son," Mason said, and Crawford gave him a startled glance. "Maybe that is the best way; I'll admit everything to Sheriff Ward." Mason smiled. "He won't be too hard on me when he understands the whole thing was just a joke."

"A joke?" Jimmy looked puzzled. "Doesn't seem very funny to me."

"Me either, now." Mason never took his eyes off Crawford, who sat in a chair staring at him. "You see, Jimmy, my friend Mr. Crawford and I made a bet."

"What sort of a bet, Dad?"

"I bet Lem Crawford I could rob the bank and get away with it without anyone being hurt."

"But someone did get hurt," said Crawford. "Joe Farrell, the bank teller was killed by the lone bandit."

"Oh," said Mason bleakly; "I didn't know that."

"Of course you didn't, Dad," said Jimmy quietly. "I heard about the bank robbery yesterday. Happened the day before—one of the boys brought the news back from town." The boy's face brightened. "You couldn't have done it—you were with Mother and me all day long Wednesday. Funny I didn't think of that until now. I've been believing Mr. Crawford."

"I'm sorry the boy is so smart, Adam," Crawford said. "Makes it harder for us all."

"He sounded like he was your friend, Dad," said Jimmy. "Didn't want you fighting when he has a gun and yours is missing. Should have known he wasn't telling the truth. Shucks, my dad is not a bank robber!"

"Now you're talking sense, son," Mason said proudly.

"Of course—Mr. Crawford is the bank robber," said Jimmy. "Been wondering about that ever since I found the money in a sack stuffed in the oven of the kitchen stove here."

"What?" Crawford leaped to his feet and glared at the boy. "Where's that money now, Jimmy?"

"Still in the stove where you left it, Mr. Crawford. I wasn't going to steal it. We Masons aren't thieves."

"Too bad about this." Crawford drew his gun. "Now I've got to kill you, Mason, and get out of this part of the country for good. Guess I'll have to take the boy along so he won't talk. I didn't want it to be this way."

"Better stop him before he starts shooting, Sheriff," said Jimmy, staring at the half-open door of the dark bedroom. "I wouldn't want my dad to be hurt."

"You're right, Jimmy. I wouldn't either."

THE BEDROOM door swung open wide. Sheriff John Ward stood there, gray-haired and stooped with the weight of the law years, the gun covering Crawford steady in his hand.

"Drop your gun, Crawford," the sheriff said.

Relief swept over Mason in waves as Crawford's gun dropped to the floor.

"Only two miles from here to town," Jimmy said. "Thought I better get the sheriff before Mr. Crawford got back from our place with you, Dad." The boy looked anxiously at his father. "Thought maybe you'd want to tell Mr. Ward about—about everything even if you were the robber."

"The boy did the right thing," said the sheriff. "Pick up Crawford's gun, please, Adam."

"Of course, Sheriff."

Mason put the gun on a table. Then he stepped close to Crawford and

swung hard. First with a right to the jaw, then a left to the spot just above the belt. There was a lot of blubber to Crawford's bigness. He hit the floor hard and just sprawled there, no fight in him.

"He deserved that," said Ward. From behind the sheriff appeared two deputies. "We'll take care of him, Adam. You and the boy better be getting back home. Heard about Jimmy being missing and done some looking for him myself. Never thought of his being here though."

"You're right, Sheriff," said Mason. "If you don't mind, I'll borrow Crawford's horse for Jimmy. Time we were getting back to the Bar M. His mother is right worried about the boy."

In a few minutes Mason and Jimmy were riding back home through the cold night. It had started to snow, but Adam Mason thought the weather was wonderful. Nothing like crisp fresh air to make a man feel good.

"What'll we tell Mother?" Jimmy asked as they rode side by side. The boy handled the bay well.

"The whole story." Mason's voice was a happy sound. "Want her to be as proud of her son as I am."

"Unhuh," said Jimmy. "You know, Dad, I never did think Mr. Crawford was a very good neighbor."

Answers To "B is for Bullet"

1. Ejector
2. Caliber
3. Pan
4. Rifling
5. Snaphance
6. Ballistics
7. Patch Box
8. Primer
9. Breech
10. Bullet

Nola Shane was a gal who gave orders to men, including the sheriff, but Benny Wilde recognized the type. Lovely Nola wanted a man who could tame her—and now that he was siding the Shanes against rustlers, Benny found that he had an additional job on his hands!

here's a thrilling feature novel

THE SANTA FE KID

by Peter Norcross

It leads off the December issue of

DOUBLE - ACTION WESTERN

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A FOOL FOR LUCK

An Offtrail Story of Today's West

by FRANK F. FINNEY

MY DUTIES in taking care of some gas wells in the northern part of the Osage Reservation in Oklahoma Territory and the pipe line supplying gas to the village of Cedar Springs, just over the boundary line in Kansas, sometimes brought me near the John Gleason ranch. Gleason had purchased a rough, rocky 160 acre tract, scarcely any part of it suitable for cultivation. He occupied a two-room cabin and had built a barn and a chicken house. Besides some chickens his livestock consisted of eight cows and and a team of horses.

I liked to stop and visit the cheerful, tall young fellow. He had steady gray eyes and auburn hair. Women called him handsome, or at least good-looking. With all his cheerfulness, I think at times he became lonesome and welcomed my company. A stack of books on his table suggested he enjoyed reading. I found this to be true and that from childhood he had been a great reader, reveling in books of a romantic nature. He was possessed with a visionary and impractical temperament, and his reading of western stories had influenced him to leave his home in New England to take up life in the west, convinced that wealth and adventure awaited him there.

Generously, if unwisely, his father staked the inexperienced youth, just out of college, with the proceeds from a mortgage on their home, and with this money Gleason drifted into Kansas. In keeping with his trusting nature, he purchased from a smooth-talking real estate man the place where he still lived. Soon he learned that there was no getting rich ranching on such land.

Contrary to the notions he had formed of the romantic life of a cowboy, who scorned milking a cow or fooling with chickens, he was forced to do these things to make a mere living. Despite his discouraging prospects, he would say, "Something will turn up,"

and I found him almost always optimistic and apparently happy. His cheerfulness was so habitually manifested that he became known in Cedar Springs and the country around as "Happy" Gleason. I never heard him speak badly of anyone, and consequently people spoke well of him, and he was well liked.

Only one time did I suspect that he was becoming less confident when he said, "I think I will sell out and go to Texas. A change of pasture makes a fatter calf." It was then he told me that his parents were being supported by his schoolteacher sister. After our acquaintanceship became more intimate, he confessed he left a girl back East whom he loved, and who had promised to marry him when he returned. With this knowledge of his personal affairs, I realized how deeply he felt the lack of money and was not surprised when he told me, "I need money and intend to get it fast, big money."

For the life of me though, I could not think of how he could get money fast, short of robbing a bank or holding up a train.

Suddenly a thought startled me when I remembered his words, spoken a few days before, when we were discussing the holding up of a bank at White Rock by the lone bandit, Henry Wycliff. I made the comment that it was a poor way to get money, and Gleason replied, "Well, Wycliff got away with it, didn't he?" I did not want to misjudge my friend; but as I jogged along on my pony back to the lease camp, I could only wonder whether he entertained wild ideas about getting money the way Wycliff had.

THE NEXT time I dropped in on Gleason, I found his confidence and cheerfulness entirely restored. After having been out in the cold all day, I found the sight of logs burning brightly in his fireplace a welcome sight. Beside the fire sat Gleason with his wolfhound, Blazer, lying beside him. Smiling with delight, Gleason jumped up to greet me, and I had the feeling that he had good news and that something at last had turned up. My hunch was correct; dirt had been turned up, and with it a mystery which to Happy Gleason's mind presented all kinds of rosy expectations.

"Last night," he began, "I noticed Blazer was nervous, sniffling and growling as he caught a scent he didn't like. I opened the door and followed him outside. As I looked, I saw a glimmer of light on the hillside in the pasture. After watching it awhile and not seeing it again, I called the dog, locked the doors—which I don't ordinarily do—and placed my pistol on the chair by the bed. This morning I found a hole in the pasture about three feet deep and five across, with the dirt piled around it."

As I meditated, seeking an explanation for this unusual occurrence, Gleason gave me his solution: "There is gold on this place, and someone is prospecting to find the vein." His conclusions were not convincing to me; but at the moment, I could think of no better reasons which might explain the digging by the intruders.

These incidents did not cease with the first hole; two similar excavations were found within the next few weeks, before the mystery was solved. I heard the whole story from Mr. Hunter, cashier of the Liberty City Bank where I had business, before I got it first-hand from Gleason.

The wind was blowing cold from the north. Gleason was sitting, as was his custom, reading before the fire. Suddenly the dog jumped up, growling and bristling as the clunching of wheels and voices were heard above the howling wind. Gleason reached for his pistol, from the drawer of the table, and slipped it into his pocket, when a knock came at the the door. As he held Blazer by the

collar, two men entered the room, and the light on the table blew out.

Seen in the flickering light of the fireplace, the men appeared tough-looking characters—probably whiskey peddlers, Gleason thought. The taller one—with a flattened broken nose and unshaved black stubble on his face—proved to be Bill. The other one, called Sam, was short, slight and pale, with an ashen drooping mustache and a dreamy look, as if he was living in another sphere.

"Tolerable cold out thar," Bill said.

"Sit down by the fire and get warm," Gleason invited.

"We aim to stay awhile," the sinister, dark-faced Bill remarked. "Got some business with you." With this, they both sat down on the bench before the fire while Gleason half dragged his dog into the kitchen and shut the door. The blue jeans the men wore were stained, and their boots were caked with mud.

"You ain't got a drink, have you partner?" Sam asked shivering. "I'm plumb chilled."

"Sorry, don't have a drop," Gleason replied, "but I'll get you some hot coffee." While the strangers were drinking the coffee, they got down to their business, Bill leading off:

"Did you ever heer'd about them miners what were killed by the Injuns right here on this place of yourn? Well, if you ain't, I'll tell you about 'em. Six of 'em coming back from Californy camped right here under the hill. Them Osages killed and scalped all of 'em —yes, sar, all but ole Tom Atkins.

"He hid out in the bresh, and when the Injuns cleared out, Tom he sneaked back to the wagons, got the gold they had in a tin box, and took and burned it. Tom got back to ole Missoo, and died thar. Osages didn't want the gold; all they were aimin' fer was to get scalps to help a big chief who had died to get to the Happy Hunting Grounds. Ole Tom, he left a map showin' whar he buried that thar gold; and cause he was my grandpap, I got the map. This is the way we found the gold. Got her right here in the buggy. Sam, light up the lantern and we will show it to Mr. Gleason."

SAM LED the way to the buggy where the team was tied to the elm tree in front of the cabin. He pulled a blanket off a tin box and opened the lid. There, in golden richness under the lantern's light, shone a pile of ingots about the size of ears of corn. Gleason's eyes also gleamed as he stared in amazement at the gold. After he had counted the pile of twelve bars, and lifted one to feel its weight, he and the two men returned to the house.

"We're aimin' to treat you right," Bill said. "This yere place where we found it is yourn. We don't want no trouble with you nor the law. If you want half of it and keep your mouth shet, it's yourn. We've done a right sart of work and you ain't done a lick. All we is askin' is a thousand dollars for our work. You can get shed of your part for ten thousand dollars, maybe more."

Gleason, excited over the fortune dropped into his lap, agreed hastily, "It's a deal. Come back tomorrow night and give me the gold; I'll have the money for you."

"Mr. Gleason, you will never be sorry," Bill called back as he and his pardner climbed into the buggy and drove off.

Happy Gleason, riding one of the horses of his team which acted double-duty sometimes as a riding mount, was in the bank of Liberty City, twenty miles away, soon after it was opened the next morning. By mortgaging his cows, and adding to the mortgage on his land, he secured the money he needed. That night the men showed up, turned over the ingots as agreed, and Gleason handed over to them a thousand dollars in greenbacks.

The next morning Gleason lost no time in returning to the bank carrying

his treasure in a suitcase. Confidently he opened it and showed the contents to the cashier, Mr. Hudson, who viewed the gold with astonishment. He suggested they take one bar to the jeweler to be assayed and place the others in the vault for safe keeping. Testing the metal with a chisel, and a few licks with a hammer, the jewler said, "This is brass washed over with a thin coat of gold. It is not worth a dime."

GLEASON laughed heartily as he told me about the whole affair. I did not have the heart to tell him what a fool I thought he had been, although I do not think he would have taken offense. That he was the laughingstock of the whole community did not seem to disturb him; and on his daily rounds he met the quips and joined in the levity as though someone else, and not himself had been the victim of the swindle.

If he needed renewed hope, it came in the early spring when something again turned up auspiciously. The prairies were taking on a green tinge, faintly promising the luxuriant, bluestem grass-covered pastures to follow, and along the creek banks plum blossoms gave forth their fragrance, and redbud trees showed patches of sanguine color.

In high spirits Gleason confided to me that he had leased his land to the Kan-Okla Oil Company. The lease carried one-eighth royalty, and the company was obligated to drill a well on his property within one year. With overwhelming optimism, he was already making large plans to spend his income. He told me that he intended to marry his sweetheart, Kate; buy a large ranch, and provide means for his parents to live comfortably the remainder of their lives. After Kan-Okla leased his place, the company secured a lease on the land owned by his neighbor, Charlie Hopkins, and announced the first well would be drilled on the Hopkins' farm 300 feet from Gleason's east line.

Without delay, rig timbers were moved in, the derrick erected, and the hole spudded in. The drilling proceeded without fishing jobs or any other kind of trouble. Within three weeks the Bartlesville sand was reached and the well completed as a producer, good for 50 barrels of oil per day.

After I learned the outcome of the well, I expected to find Gleason jubilant. Surprisingly; he showed no elation over the news. I soon found the reason. A letter from his New England girl revealed that she had apparently become tired of waiting, and was about to be married to another man. Perhaps acquiring money no longer seemed so all-important to Happy Gleason.

After completing the Hopkins well, Kan-Okla moved their rig to the new location on the Gleason land. It now looked as if this offset of the producing well was a sure-shot for a producer. We strung about half-a-mile of two-inch pipe, and laid a line from our field to supply fuel gas for drilling the well. I seldom saw Gleason at the well while it was drilling, and I noticed that he spent more time than usual in Cedar Springs.

As I rode by his cabin on the way home one evening, he called to me from the barn lot: "Hey, there. Get off and stay awhile. You're going to have supper with me. Something special."

I readily accepted, and after I had unsaddled my pony, Gleason threw a few ears of corn in the feed trough, and we went into the cabin for our own meal. I saw nothing special about the food on the table—just the usual fare, salt pork, beans, sorghum, and biscuits, until for dessert he brought to the table a cherry pie and said, "Compliments of Alice Parker."

I DID NOT have the aquaintance of Alice, daughter of the owner of the Cedar Springs Mercantile Company, but I had seen her and was in full agreement with those who said that she was the prettiest girl in the whole country. Gleason told me that he and the

girl had picked the cherries for the pie; in fact, they had gathered buckets of them from the trees in the orchard back of the Parker home in Cedar Springs. Frankly he admitted that he visited her frequently even when there were no cherries to gather.

The Bartlesville sand had already been reached and the casing run when I rode up to the drilling well. The Kan-Okla superintendent was there. He told me the top of the sand, as correlated with the Hopkins well, was running ten feet low. I was not surprised to see Alice Parker sitting on the lazy bench alongside Gleason. The walking beam was rocking in its methodical motion, and the driller was letting out the screw. As I watched, the tool dresser threw the tug line on the bull wheels, the cable pulled up taut, and as the engine labored, the cable wound itself around the bull wheel shaft and brought the drilling tools to the surface.

The bailer was run on the sand line to bottom, pulled out, and its fluid contents were dumped in the slush sluice after a sample was saved in a bucket. After several washings with clear water, the superintendent reached into the bucket, took out some of the sediment, and spread it in his palm. "The sand looks good," he said; "should get the pay next screw."

We anxiously waited as the next screw was run, and then another and another, until as the evening hours approached, twenty feet of the sand had been drilled without any show of oil or gas. The superintendent inspected the last sample and said, "We are through the sand and into the shale. I did not expect it, but the well is sure a dry hole."

It was dark when Alice and Gleason, followed by me leading my horse, walked up the hill from the well to the cabin. Gleason insisted that he accompany Alice back to Cedar Springs, and he saddled up both of their horses which were loose in the barn lot. I heard him laughing happily as they rode away.

I planned to stay with him overnight, and while awaiting his return, I rummaged through his library. Some of Gleason's books were stacked on his table, but others were piled loosely on the floor. When I examined these books, I found volumes of the old philosophers and a copy of the Bible. Picking up a book containing *The Golden Sayings of Epictetus,* I scanned its contents, and as I read, a passage which Gleason had already marked especially caught my interest: *Who is a stoic?... Show me a man that is sick—and happy; in danger—and happy; on his deathbed—and happy; an exile—and happy; in evil report—and happy!"* Could it be that Gleason's character was anchored to a firmer rock than I had expected, and that this happy-go-lucky fellow found nourishment for his spirit from such books as Epictetus and the Bible?

IT WAS NOT long before my friend came through the door, romping with his dog and laughing at its antics. His companionship with Alice Parker pleased me, for I thought a romance was in progress which could go far to compensate him for his unchanging bad luck. In the course of the evening I managed to steer the conversation to the subject of Alice, but as a reward for my curiosity, I received only a disappointing disclosure.

Agreeing with me, Gleason said, "Yes, Alice is a pretty girl and a good friend. You knew, of course, that she was engaged to marry George Randall of Liberty City, didn't you?" I could detect neither criticism nor disappointment in the voice of my friend when he made this startling announcement. However, I believed that he was sincerely in love with the girl, and that the news of her marriage to another man must have been but another of his blasted hopes.

Before winter had seriously set in, I was transferred out of the North Osage country. When I left, the sumac

bushes were blazing as if on fire, and the foliage on the hills and valleys had taken on brilliant colors in fleeting splendor. Alice Parker had already departed from Cedar Springs to attend college, and in the orchard where she and Gleason had gathered cherries, leaves were falling. The orchard may have looked lonesome and desolate to Gleason as he called to deliver milk and eggs, but in keeping with his personality, I think more likely he saw it blooming as it would be in the coming spring with Alice there to grace it.

I called on my friend, sorry to have to say good-by. Neither the dry hole, the gold bricks, nor the disappointment in love seemed to have changed his cheerful temperament in the least. At this point, his unrealistic optimism seemed almost fantastic to me. When he again expressed his confidence in acquiring a lot of money, the old ugly doubt returned to my mind. Men drift into crime with less provocation, I thought.

In an attempt to warn him subtly, I said, "You know, they caught Henry Wycliff, and he will probaby hang." I was sorry I said this as soon as I observed the look in his eyes. My friend was obviously hurt and suspected that I did not trust him.

"So long," he called in response to my "Good-by" and good luck." As I slapped my pony on the hip and started on my way, I noticed that my friend had turned towards the barn, whistling a tune as he went. Immediately I asked myself a question for which there was no adequate answer, "Was this fellow a stoical wise man or just a cheerful fool?"

I was very busy at my new location and so immersed in my own affairs that I had little time to think of Happy Gleason. One morning when I was having breakfast at a local restaurant, about a year after I had last seen Gleason, I picked up a copy of the *Liberty City Globe,* and at once my eyes fell on the bold headline, *"Gusher brought in on the Gleason farm."* I had to read the finer type to be convinced that this good luck had actually come to my old friend.

"The Kan-Okla Oil Company have deepened No. 1, Gleason, and have brought in a large producer estimated good for 1200 barrels of high grade oil daily. The well which was completed over a year ago as a dry hole, was deepened into the Mississippi Lime where a new producing horizon was encountered. The oil flowed all over the country surrounding the well until tankage could be provided." To add to my surprise and delight, I read further: "It will be remembered by John Gleason's friends that he and Miss Alice Parker, the charming daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Parker of Cedar Springs; were united in marriage last May."

It was heartwarming to know that sometimes things do turn out as we think they should. However, had fortune not smiled, I like to think and firmly believe that Gleason would have continued to live cheerfuy and hopefully, expecting something to turn up. He still would have been the same "Happy" Gleason.

★

The time had come to quit the lobo pack, while he was still alive and the law had no claim on him. Hawk Gunn wanted to go straight and find a good woman for a change. He'd just be Hannibal Gunn and he'd give his brother and sister-in-law a needed hand while he was settling down. Then he found that Todd Gunn was up to his neck in powdersmoke trouble . . . .

GO HOME, LOBO!

Novelet of The Out-Trails

by SAUL ANTHONY

HAWK GUNN was going home. He felt good about it, too. He sort of rolled his wide-spanned shoulders inside his dark shirt and grinned into his glass when he drank. That made him feel self-conscious and sheepish. He put up his big red ham of a hand and pushed over the straw-

colored hair on his forehead. He was handsome, in a thick-featured, animal way, with a confident glint in his eyes. Then he galvanized, though nothing about him stirred.

A man had come through the bat-wing doors, in from the sun-glaring street, and stopped too suddenly. Then he had started to walk too lightly and quickly to be natural. The boys on the out-trails always said that Gunn had ears better than a hawk's eyes; that was how he got his handle. Hawk was thinking quickly. If he faced the glare of the street, he wouldn't be able to distinguish a man's face for several seconds, anyway. On top of that, the movement might be a warning to send the other into action.

There was no chance of seeing what might be working around behind him, either, because the big bar mirror was covered with cheesecloth—protection against flyspecks in summertime.

Then Hawk Gunn spotted the cat on the bar ledge, behind the counter. It had been slipping along, in front of the stacked bottles. Now the cat had frozen, save for its yellow eyes. They followed the silently-moving newcomer. Gunn's eyes followed the cat's eyes. The cat's tail weaved. Gunn's left hand went out and around the bottle, as if to pour himself another shot. A boot behind creaked. The old toothless man dozing at a table in the front corner stirred.

"Turn around, Gunn—and keep your paws bar level!" The nasal spiteful voice whipped across the somnolent room.

"Sure," Hank Gunn drawled. And he came around slow-like, half grinning. Then his left arm slashed around with the bottle it gripped and it was bulleting at where the other stood, even before Gunn faced him or had really seen him.

Dutch Schlintz had a gun levelled before his hip, but he had to duck the could trigger, the big Hawk had whirling bottle. And then before he slammed up a hand from his own holster with a cocked .45 in it.

"Something you wanted to speak about, Dutch?" he asked sarcastically. The bottle bounced off a post and then fell softly into a sawdust box for spitting. The old coot up forward sat up and cupped his hand to his ear. But he was stone deaf anyway.

Schlintz sort of swallowed and pulled at his cadaverous face with a claw of hand. "I was going to give you a square break, Gunn. But—you and me got something to settle. I don't like you around places where I am, Gunn. You ain't good for decent lawful communities."

"Yeah?" drawled Hawk

The skinny-limbed Schlintz nodded. "I'm sort of a lawman, too, you know. I could take you in."

"You—a lawman? Same's a slaver-jawed coyote, Gunn... But you want to take me in—try it."

Dutch Schlintz drew himself up. "I'm giving you a chance, Gunn. Get drifting."

"What-t?"

"I'm telling you to pull stakes for the good of the community!"

A SLOW flush tided Hawk Gunn's face then, and the big eyes lidded. You could see the man born with a savage temper, instinctively ever-ready to meet violence with violence. "You got a gun decorating your hand, Schlintz," Hawk's voice came from deep in his throat. "Run me out, if you want..."

The silence seemed ready to crack like something too brittle. Schlintz looked hard at Hawk's gun. Then he sneeringly holstered his own.

"I'm no saloon-brawling tough, Gunn," Schlintz said. "I'll give you fair warning. Get out of town..." He walked halfway to the door and turned. "I'm over in the Big Town, Gunn, I'll come across the bridge at sundown, ready to draw. If you're still here—"

Hawk wagged a mocking finger at him. "Take a good look at that sundown, Dutch. A good look. Because you won't be seeing many more."

Schlintz marched out, waving a fist once as he threw an oath behind him. Hawk turned back to the bar in time to see the bartender appearing at the head of the stairs from the cellar with a load of bottled goods in his arms. He had caught Schlintz's parting gesture and he could see Hawk standing with gun still bared.

Hawk chuckled. "Just an old friend trying to show me a new trick on the draw, mister. I dropped that bottle. Set me up another." But his face went grim and worried when the barkeep turned away.

Because he knew he wasn't going to meet Dutch Schlintz at sundown...

Gunn tossed off two drinks quickly to get rid of that cold dirty feeling inside him. He wasn't used to getting his heels run over from side-stepping trouble. He lit up one of those little black cigaros he favored.

He remembered how he had been thinking about going home just before Dutch Schlintz came in. But the odds would be all against him going if he killed Dutch Schlintz.

He knew why Schlintz carried the grudge and had tried to jump him. It went back to a fight at Terra del Fuego, in its gambling quarter. A half-drunk horde from up on the hill, led by a handful of officers deputized within the last hour, had come swarming in. Their avowed intention was to clean the place out and grab some of the wanted men there. But it was simply an excuse to loot and rob and maybe collect some bounty money. It had been a tough bloody ruckus. Schlintz's brother had been one of those blustering last-minute deputies. And Hawk had put a bullet in him that made him a cripple for life.

He hadn't even felt as if he were bucking the Law when he had done it. That night in the gambling quarter, the other Schlintz brother was as much a lobo as any other man in the place. But he knew someday there would be a payoff. Dutch Schlintz always boasted how his family was known as the Fighting Schlintzs back where he came from. And he was a vengeful scheming cuss in he bargain.

" 'Nother drink," Gunn called down to the bartender. The latter was down at the end of the counter with the deaf old coot. The old gent was trying to tell what had happened and guessing at what had been said.

Hawk wasn't worried about what would happen if he and Dutch met in the road and swapped shots. He was too confident in his own gun prowess, had faced better men's Colts' muzzles before. Dutch might try some kind of trick and undoubtedly was not alone in the Big Town acrosss the river. But Gunn could have got friends within a couple hours ride. It wasn't any of those things.

The point was that if he did bring down Schlintz, they might put on a man-hunt for him. And as a fugitive, he couldn't go home. He had determined upon that. Dutch had influence in certain circles. Years back, he had been a deputy sheriff in Munro County and rated a certain amount of standing because of that. Since then he had done odd jobs as a special officer, as a legal gunman hired to clean out tough spots. He stood in with the Law. If he were slain, the Law would be danged interested in who had done it. And especially so, were that man Hawk Gunn.

They couldn't pin anything much on Gunn, but they knew he had ridden the owl hoot trails and run with lobos. If he killed a semi-official agent of the law, they would be interested in looking him up, and seeing how much they can hang on him.

And Hawk Gunn wanted to go home, to stay there. He had to have clean hands to do it.

HE COULD take a runout, of course. Just sneak away before sundown. His heavy lips curled at the thought. Still, it might have been worth it to get home all right. But that too was out of the question, because Dalie was coming in some time tonight.

Dalie was an old saddle pard who had ridden with him when they were both with the Placer Craig bunch. A nice little bald gent who always carried an Anglican prayer book. He had done a short stretch in the Big House on a rustling charge; now he was coming out to pick himself up a small place and settle down. Gunn had cached some of their dinero back in the hills once. Old Dalie would need that now. And Hawk had gone and gotten it and had arranged to meet Dalie here this night. It was right in Gunn's money belt now.

So he couldn't duck out from meeting Dutch Schlintz unless he wanted to miss Dalie. There didn't seem any way out of it. The big man frowned through his cigaro smoke. Another customer came in and the barkeep did some behind-the-hand whispering to him. The customer began to study Gunn furtively and then he went out. The word, vague as it was, would get around.

Voices carried in from the footpath on the road. "Yep, in there. A gunslinger! Uh-huh.... I tell you...."

A little later a white-mustached man came in with a big silver star on his calfskin vest. He was the Justice of the Peace of the Little Town. Its real name was Hendrix. But when it spread across the river and the railroad was brought in to the development on the other side and that flourished and expanded, the folks over there called that Big Hendrix. The original part settled down to a drab somnolent existence. And the natives referred to the two sections as Big Town and Little Town. Big Town was where Schlintz was staying.

"Anybody around here seen Pinto Adams?" the Justice of the Peace asked. "He was orey-eyed again last night and threw his bed through the window of his room over at the Widow's boarding house. A day or two in jail will cool him off, I reckon."

After the peace officer left, Hawk Gunn got to thinking. Then he chuckled out loud. He had the answer. "Hey, Al, gimme a bottle and to hell with a glass!" he roared abruptly. "Danged glass takes too much time." He put the bottle to his lips when he got it and gurgled deep as the barman watched with bugging eyes.

He snorted and glared at the bartender when he finally lowered the bottle. "Knew a fuddy-duddy school teacher fella once who used to drink red ink. Is that what you're selling here for whisky, pard?"

HALFWAY through the bottle, a couple of strangers came in. Gunn lurched down the bar and insisted one of them was a gent by the name of Cal Rand from Badman's Bend who owed him twenty dollars. When the little man insisted he wasn't, big Gunn rammed down the other's sombrero over his ears and then good-naturedly bought him a couple of drinks. Shortly afterward he gave a cuspidor a boot that sent it rolling out under the batwing doors into the street.

"Look here, stranger, you git tough in here and I'll call the—" the barkeep began.

"Aw, go kiss your grandmaw!" Hawk bellowed back. "This place is too danged tame for a curly wolf like me!" He slapped on his hat and went lurching out the doors after tripping over a chair and apologizing to it with a sweeping bow. Some of his old companions of the out-trails would have been amazed. They had seen him on more than one night drink every other man under the table, call for a half bottle of whisky to top off his breakfast, and then go about his business.

He had a few snorts in another

place, called a horse-trader a so-and-so liar after an argument, threw a handful of silver at the proprietor's face, and reeled on from there. The sun was low in the west, already tinting a bloody hue the bluffs of the Big Town across the river. Gunn picked up a companion, then threw him in the horse trough and entered a third whisky mill.

It didn't take long after that. Already some of the townsfolk were peering in under the doors from a safe distance. He started to slug it down from another bottle minus the glass. Then he saw the white-mustached Justice of the Peace across the road and Gunn chucked the bottle through a front window of the place.

The peace officer marched in, a gun out, "Stranger, you aim to come along peaceful or have I gotta—" He looked a little worried.

Hawk Gunn settled the issue for him by flopping into a chair and starting to snore. A few minutes later he was being escorted stumbling down the road and into the little dobie jail. Gunn sprawled on the Teton pole cot in a corner, apparently in a drunken stupor. He was in a second-floor cell overlooking the road.

After the John Law went downstairs, Hawk tiptoed over to the barred windows. Purplish shadows were already creeping out over the alkali road like silently lapping tongues of water. He didn't have long to wait. Already a lamp flickered over the counter inside the hay and feed store across the street. A woman poked her head out of a window further down and yelled in a reedy soprano, "John, dinner's on the table, John." It was sundown.

Dutch Schlintz came. He appeared around the shed across the river, leading his horse, and walked slowly across the bridge. His lean head was outthrust and one hooked hand was curved with hair-trigger tension over an open-topped holster. And Gunn watched him from the cell window, grinning broadly.

A few knots of men were gathered before the bars along the short street, waiting and ready to duck. Because the deaf old coot had been the only witness to the altercation, nobody was certain just what was due to happen. Schlintz pulled up, legs wide-stanced, and barked at somebody to come out of a dusty alley.

"Come out—or I'll drill you pronto, coyote!" he snarled.

A gangling one-eyed idiot younker with no shoes edged out into view, gibbering foolishly. Then he threw the stick he held and scooted back into the alley. Upstairs in the jail, Gunn had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep from roaring.

Dutch Schlintz continued his cat-footed advance. He halted before one barroom and demanded to know if Gunn was in there. Nobody knew who he was talking about. He peered over the batwing doors and then went on. A window slapped down in a house behind him and he spun as if it had been a gunshot. He cleared his throat as if he felt ridiculous himself as he dropped his half-drawn Colts back into its scabbard.

"You lowdown bounty hunter," Hawk snorted from his lookout, "you know I never gave it to no man in the back!"

Schlintz yanked down his pinch-topped sombrero and went on past the bar in which he had tried to jump Gunn. There was nothing much but a couple of hovels, a photographer's shop, and a weed-grown shell of a burnt-out barn beyond that. Then Dutch Schlintz threw back his head and guffawed. He faced back toward the river.

"Come on, boys. The lily-livered polecat jumped town to save his hide," he called. And two friends, gents with tied-down holsters, came up from the cover of the river-bank and came to meet him.

Up in the jail window, Gunn was black-browed but he whistled softly as he saw the pair. "So that was the game, eh...."

Darkness closed in. He heard Schlintz ride off. His trick had worked...

- 2 -

HAWK GUNN called the peace officer upstairs and paid for the broken window handsomely, said he was danged sorry and wondered if maybe he could buy a bottle so they could split a few drinks. During the night, Dalie came down to the jail and saw him. He had known Dalie would be able to track him down if he were in the town. He turned over Dalie's share of the cache to him, and an hour before dawn he got the peace officer to release him—just in case Dutch Schlintz might have learned of his whereabouts and be snooping around when he was supposed to be released later.

He didn't want any part of trouble. He just wanted to get back home and settle down. He whistled in the pre-dawn drizzle as he took the upper fork beyond the town in the saddle of his big steeldust horse. It seemed like ages since he had slipped away from that home in the night to take the trail on his own.

It hadn't been his own home, exactly. It had been Pete's place, a scrubby run-down ranch outfit. Just a hundred head of bony cow critters and a paintless house that rattled in the wind, not a decent piece of pasture land on it. Pete was his brother, an even fifteen years older. Pete had taken him to live there after his parents had died when he was little more than a baby. Pete had been good to him, but it wasn't that.

As he had gotten older, he got to looking around him. There was Pete working like a dog to hold the place together with one old cowhand, almost falling asleep in his plate at the supper table nights. Getting gnarled and growing tight-lipped with the strain. Going into town with hat in hand figuratively, in his darned-up black suit, to plead with the bank for another extension on his notes.

And Sarah, Pete's wife, hands cracked and work-worn, hair a little grayer and cheeks a little less rosy each year. Getting up at dawn and taking care of the two babies and helping out in the barn at times, always trying to look cheerful as she went about in her faded calico dresses. Hawk could still remember the time she wept silently looking at the pretty things in a mail-order catalogue.

And then there was the boy, little Anson, with that strange ear affliction. The local pill-roller would call around and say how the child should be taken to see one of those specialist fellows up in the city. But Pete could never quite scrape together enough to afford it.

HAWK, CHRISTENED Hannibal, had seen those things. Had seen life dragging down and sapping the strength from their very veins. And he had said to himself, "This ain't for me." He hadn't meant to be selfish or cruel. But he couldn't see how they were ever going to win, his brother and his wife. The years would beat them out right down to a gravestone.

Then he'd been up in town. Cully's Hill, one day and met that stranger passing through. Big fat laughing hombre called Record. He was rigged out in a fancy outfit Pete Gunn couldn't have bought without selling off his whole herd. Record had taken a shine to him when he saw him scrap it out with the town bully, the saloon keeper's son, a younker twice his heft,

and finally down him in the ragweeds of the gutter.

"Smart young beardless button with nerve like you can git somewheres, boy—less'n he'd rather bust his back digging post-holes for life.

. . . Shame for a fella like you to be wearing an old hat like that with his hair sticking out through a hole in the crown, I say." Record winked wisely. "Don't see me wearing duds like that."

That did it. Hawk had sent back a note to Pete and gone down the line with Record. That had been nine years back.

After a while, he had broken off with Record. Record had specialized in holding up small barrooms and stores in isolated towns where there were no banking facilities. Another trick of his was to follow out the heavy winner in a gambling hall and jump him. Gunn had thrown in with a small owlhoot bunch and earned his nickname, Hawk.

They broke up, and one day Hawk got in a ruckus with a liquored-up gunslinger reckoned one of the toughest out of the Washita country. Gunn shot him dead, and was hired by the town to clean it up for five hundred dollars. He did, and drew a like offer from another place up the line. It was after that, that Placer Craig, leader of one of the strongest lobo bunches in the state, asked him to ride with them. Hawk held out for a special cut in the loot and got it.

The years had gone fast. Craig was killed and the bunch split up, five of them riding under Gunn. They went out only after big stuff, usually working with somebody on the inside through bribes. The take had been rich.

And then one day he just up and told the boys he was quitting. He had an overpowering urge to go back and see the only ones he could call family. He was wealthy enough to get a nice outfit to settle down on. He had come a long way from Cully's hill and the Monetto Strip. So he figured there wasn't much chance of the law trailing him back, especially across a state line. He had killed but two men, both killers themselves. That had been when he was serving as a special officer to clean out those towns.

"WONDER if they'll recognize me?" he mused half aloud as he sat eating in a Chino restaurant that next night. He had changed plenty since riding out of Cully's Hill. He had been a lank stripling of a younker then without his full growth. Sort of shy acting with teeth that looked too big for his mouth. Used to stutter sometimes with nervousness. Especially when, when in town, he would go and hunker down on the steps of the minister's porch and make calf eyes at his daughter, Mary Ann. He had never forgotten the way her blue eyes danced when she teased him, and he got flustered.

Yes, he had changed. He was man-sized, husky as an animal and with the confident vitality of one. There was a hint of arrogance in the drawl with which he spoke. And as for women, he had a half-laughing way of looking at them that made them grow flustered now. When he went to see Mary Ann again, it wouldn't be as the brother of a two-bit rancher any more. He had something to offer her.

He'd lend Pete—Pete would be too stubborn-proud to take it as a gift—dinero to put himself on his feet and fix up his rancho. Then he'd take them into town—no, up to the place on the river. Sarah would have some new dresses. And there would be toys and clothes for the kids. Of course, he'd have to tell Pete some kind of a windy about getting in on a silver strike or maybe buying cows below the line and bringing them over at a fat profit. But it would be swell going back and—

He was putting his fork to his mouth when he saw an hombre jump back from sight outside the restaurant front

window. Hawk Gunn gave no sign, lowering and filling his fork again. But his right hand had whipped beneath the table and had the .45 on that side out and laid across his lap. He kept on eating. A couple of minutes later two men came out of the dark of the street of the little town at the mouth of the canyon and walked in.

Hawk glimpsed them beneath the lowered brim of his flat-brimmed black Stetson and knew then. They were Holy Joe Wince and Little Packy of the old Craig bunch. Gunn looked up, at them, and past as if they were strangers.

"IF IT AIN'T ol' Hawk himself," Holy Joe said, keeping his voice down. "How're things, fella?"

"You're lookin' plumb fat and sassy, Hawk," Packy said.

Gunn took a swig from his java as if they weren't speaking to him, then glanced around to call the Chinee boy.

The pair exchanged a quick guarded look. "Don't you know your old friends, Hawk?" Holy Joe said, shoving out his hand.

Hawk Gunn looked up, surprised. "Talking to me, stranger?"

Little Packy leaned over the table. "What's the matter, Hawk—the Law on your coat-tails?" he whispered.

"Reckon you gents got me mixed up with somebody else."

Holy Joe's lip curled at the end of his mouth where the scar was. "What kind of a bluff are you trying to run on us, Hawk? We was saddle pards once with Placer Craig." Holy Joe had a quick, violent temper.

The seated man picked up his fork and speared a hunk of steak. "Placer who?"

Holy Joe switched around a chair and bestrode it. "What the hell is this, Hawk? You know dang well we ain't John Laws. Now, wait. I know you and me never rubbed too well together. But, look. We got something planned out just over the Basin way. It's a chance to get our dewclaws on a real chunk of dinero. We got two pards outside. But you're just the hairpin to rod this job and—"

Gunn put down his fork and flattened his left hand on the table. It drew attention to the little finger that had been chopped off halfway down by a slug. And that had happened after the Craig outfit had busted up and he had quit the company of these two.

"Gents, either you or me is plumb blind orey-eyed. And I ain't had a drink all day," he said with a puzzled smile.

Little Packy dropped his jaw. "Ain't you Hawk Gunn?"

"My name *is* Gunn. Samuel Gunn, though. Mebbeso you're referring to a cousin of mine. He did go bad. And I recall hearing something about him being known as Hawk—the no-good low-down coyote. He never did pay back the dinero he borrowed from my father."

Holy Joe glanced down at the lopped-off little finger. "Oh," he said, standing up. "Right sorry to have troubled you. Come on, Packy." He led the way out.

Inside, Hawk wiped sweat from his forehead. He wanted to go home clean, without any strings of his owlhoot past hanging onto him. If he hadn't been put on guard by the figure darting back from the window, he might have betrayed recognition before he caught himself...

Outside, walking down the road, Little Packy shook his head. "Gee Whillikins, for a cousin, he sure looked a heap like old Hawk. But that fella had his little finger cut off and—"

"You dang idiot, it was himself," Holy Joe spat angrily. "Gunslingers sometimes get a finger knocked off."

"How do you know it was him. It couldn't—"

"It was. Didn't you notice him eating with his left hand? Hawk was always left-handed. It's him... We'll trail him out when he leaves and see what he's up to. Too danged good for us, eh...."

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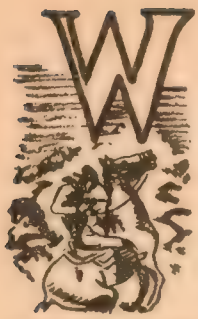

WHEN HAWK GUNN left town in the night, he headed northward into the canyon. The pony hoofs striking on the shaly bed echoed off the precipitous rock walls that gleamed faintly in the wan moonlight. The meeting up with Holy Joe and Little Packy preyed on his mind. After half an hour, acting on a hunch, he drew in behind a jumble of big boulders that lay behind a sharp elbow in the canyon side and dismounted behind some tall green and yellow mescal plants topped by their starry blooms. He put a match to one of his cigaros and waited.

An owl hooted up on the canyon side. A little while passed. Then Gunn quickly pinched out his cigaro, his keen ears picking up the faint jingle of bridle chains. The approaching riders came off the sandy stretch of the bottom and he could pick up their hoofbeats as they reverberated off the stone wall. He levered out one of his guns. They came around the jutting elbow of the canyon, Holy Joe with his pinch-topped sombrero and Little Packy sitting stooped in the kak.

For a moment, Hawk toyed with the idea of jumping out and covering them from the rear and raising hell. Then he thought better of it. After all, they had no way of knowing to where he was headed. He let them go on up the canyon. And then he mounted and rode back the way he had come.

He would take the road east from the settlement at the mouth of the canyon and swing in a loop. It would take him a little longer, but he meant to go home with his coat-tails free. But his nerves were jumpy when he got back to the settlement and he wanted a couple of quick drinks. Leaving his steeldust hitched behind a clump of alders at the edge of the place, he eased up the dark single little street quietly, hugging the deeper shadows. It was just possible that Dutch Schlintz had picked up his back-trail too.

A man stepped out of the half-open door of the livery barn and turned and moved swiftly along the rutted street. There was something guarded about him, also resembling the stringy thin-limbed build of Shlintz. Hawk cursed under his breath and faded over to the trunk of a eucalyptus tree a moment. It might have been better had he taken a chance and settled with Dutch back up in Hendrix.

Then he saw a figure detach itself from the blanket of darkness of an alley across the road and glide along watching the man who had come out of the livery stable. A moment after, a man rose from behind a horse trough not twenty feet ahead of Gunn and shawdowed that other too.

Hawk sucked in his breath. It looked as if they were setting up a drygulching job. He jerked at the flat brim of his sombrero and moved lightly after them before he thought. Outlaw, he might have been. But he never had held with gunning an hombre between the shoulder blades.

The one who had emerged from the barn was silhouetted momentarily as he shoved open the door of a little ramshackle barroom and the yellow light flooded out. The door squeaked shut.

The two trailing hombres abandoned furtiveness and ran over quickly toward it, joining. Then a third figure, the pinpoint of fire of a quirly butt revealing him in the dimness, came from the other direction and joined them. Crouched, Hawk crept in closer but could not pick up what they were saying. Then one of them chuckled and lifted his voice.

"All right. Jeb's already inside there. We're ready to hang the deadwood on

him. This'll be as easy as spitting over a log."

Another said, "Sure. Slip in the back way, silent, and we'll stampede him for keeps."

The one with the cigaret butt in his face nodded and disappeared around the side of the place. The first two loosened their hoglegs in the tied-down holsters and pushed open the door. For a heavy man, Hawk Gunn could move with amazing speed. He was up there and on the single step and catching the door before it quite slammed on the latch, then siding inside the place quickly.

It was a drab, low-ceiled whisky mill, ready to close up. The bartender was yawning behind the counter as he took off his flour-sack apron: The old swamper was up on a chair extinguishing one of the lamps in the back of the place. The sole customer was lifting his drink at the bar, the man who had emerged from the livery barn. He was a sawed-off gent, middle-aged, with a prodigious hook of red nose. He had hands big enough to choke a bull.

THE PAIR who had been trailing him were halfway across the floor to him as Gunn flattened against the front wall. Then the latter of the pair, a man with stooped shoulders and a spiked black mustache, roared out: "All right, Todd, you danged sidewinder! Hoist 'em in the name of the Law! Special officer from the marshal's office. You're wanted for the killing of that cattle inspector over at Pine Springs."

The stubby man at the bar had not been taken off guard. He was already half turned and the hand on his far side was flattened over the walnut butt of his gun. "You're a ring-tailed liar, mister, I ain't been over Pine Springs way in two years," he flung back, face twisting behind that nose.

Hawk Gunn hesitated but an instant. It was no business of his if the law wanted this man. Then his hawkish eyes picked out the figure in the rear, clamping a hand over the mouth of the scared swamper as he crept in. It was the man who had gone around to the back, Silent. And Gunn's eyes switched as he noticed the man apparently asleep at a table across the room for the first time. That gent's head had come up now. And the blue-black steel of his gun barrel levelled beneath the table gleamed faintly.

Hawk knew it was no John Law game then. A lawman would have warned this Todd that he was surrounded and pointed out his men.

The black-mustached one hunched, "Put 'em up, Todd!"

"Got a warrant for me?" Todd snapped back.

"Naw—I only use holster warrants ....If you want to draw for it—"

That Todd's whisky glass hit the bar with a little tinkle as the bartender dived out of sight. Todd's far hand whipped up with his gun. With a smirk, the black-mustached one and his companion started to hoist their hands. They were just bait for the trap. Todd never had a chance, never would have were not Hawk there.

His two big hoglegs seemed to leap into his trained fingers. And they blasted their lethal chous simultaneously. The crash of them thundered in the room. The man skulking in the rear twisted and stumbled backward, grabbing at the smashed forearm of his shooting hand, his Colts bouncing on the floor. Jeb, half hidden over at the table, ducked and slid sideward out of his chair as Gunn's bullet horneted past his hat. The latter couldn't draw head on two spots at once so his slug had missed. But it had upset Jeb's aim and his chunk of lead hammered into the bar a foot from that Todd's body.

TODD WAS dumbfounded for an instant. "I'm with you, Todd!" Hawk roared through the smash of the

reports in the room. Then he just flung himself sideward in time. For the black-mustached one had grabbed up a chair, whirled, and flung it. It splintered on the wall where Hawk had been.

Then the gunfight was on in full fury. The pair who had entered just ahead of Gunn ran toward the opening at the front end of the bar counter. A bullet plucked at the brim of Hawk's black hat, Jeb shooting around that pole in the shadows. Hawk Gunn dropped to his knees, fired back once but only nicked Jeb's cheek.

Todd had hopped back behind the other end of the bar. A shot from him drove the black-mustached one leaping from the front end of the counter. But the next instant, Todd himself reeled out onto the floor, hit in the side. The snaky Jeb had found the target.

Hawk spat an oath, his heavy lips curling. His left gun crackled its guttural song and Jeb rolled out from behind that post. The bullet had nailed him flush in the ear and two of his gold-capped teeth sprayed out on the floor from the shock even as he died. The next instant, Gunn himself was stumbling backward. A wild shot had shattered the empty bottle on the table before him and he instinctively pinched up his eyes against flying glass.

There was a shout and the tinkle of more glass as somebody shot out the single lamp alight. Hawk got his eyes open and saw the black-mustached hombre, in the flare of burning oil, dropping to the floor. The man was pointing his gun at the wounded Todd on his knees.

Gunn and Black Mustache triggered simultaneously. Both their slugs hit. Black Mustache groaned like a bogged-down cow and pitched on his face. The back door slamed. Hawk turned in time to see a figure diving a window by the front of the bar. But somebody was moving on that floor. The ex-outlaw waited. After a few moments there came the pounding hoofs of two ponies busting the breeze out of the settlement.

Finally the bartender, pale as flour, came up with a lighted candle. Hawk looked around. The Jeb gent, he knew, was dead. Black Mustache lay with his face resting on his still smoking gun. When Hawk bent close to him, he saw that he too had cashed his chips. It was Todd who was stirring.

THEY GOT him propped up in a chair. But he was going fast, hit in the chest. He managed to choke down some whisky, coughed feebly twice. "G-get me pencil—paper," he muttered. "G-gotta write message."

The trembling bartender dug it up. Somehow Todd managed to scrawl a few words. Looking over his shoulder, Hawk saw them. They read:

Can't come...Permanently detained..
K. Todd.

The pencil stub slipped from his fingers. They gave him some more whiskey. He blew a reddish bubble and lifted his eyes to Hawk, and nodded thanks.

"Y-you wouldn't be—be goin' over Cully's H-hill way—would y-you?" His eyes lighted up feebly when Gunn nodded. "Th-then would you leave this at—*Lone Star Saloon*...give bartender." His head started to slip down. "T-tell him it—it's for Mr. B-bird." He pushed the note at Hawk. Then he started to slip off the chair, waxiness already creeping over his face.

Hawk Gunn remembered what he was and how he wanted to slip back home without any trouble. He moved into the rear of the place and out the back as the first men pushed in the front door. Working back of the single street, he found his steeldust and hit the road going eastward. "Mr. Bird," he said aloud to stamp on his memory the name of the man to whom the note was to go...

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HE HAD forgotten some of the old trails and missed the turn-off that would take him north over the spiney ridge. So he had to retrace his route. After all, it was a long time since he had ridden out of Cully's Hill, a half-scared stripling out to make his fortune. It was nearly midnight the next day when he pushed his pony to the top of the long climb and looked upon the Monetta strip again. It was a big low mesa that stretched like a tongue into the southwest. A moon like a scimitar of bluish cheese hung low over the east of it.

Hawk Gunn found a spring that he remembered in those parts and let his horse drink, refilling his own canteen. Then he pushed on toward his brother Pete's Box-L place. He picked out landmarks as he rode. There was the forked chimney butte over to the east. And the string of low dome-like hills with their scrub growth where a good man with a rifle could get himself an antelope easy. The sight of those things warmed something inside him he thought he had forgotten. It would be good to return. He tried to picture the surprise on old Pete's face when he opened the door, lamp in hand, and saw him standing there. Probably wouldn't know him. Not at first, anyway.

He came to a creek he knew. It was dried up now. Never had been much water in it, not half enough for the stock of even a small outfit like Pete's. He dropped down into the crusted bed and followed it, thinking of the old days. The creek woud take him to a cart-track that led right up to the ranch-house.

What he didn't know was that in a spring freshet a couple of years ago the creek had varied its course.

He thought of how Sarah used to force the sulphur and molasses dosage down his throat come every springtime. He looked around sharply figuring he could have come to the cart-track by now. Over to the east lay the Fowler Brothers' fenceline. When he went away, they had been two old bachelors who sat around most of the time drinking red-eye in solid comfort.

He left the creek, trying to pick up the trail. Then he rode through a small shallow heavily wooded valley he recalled well. He could find his way from there all right. He was about to pucker his lips in a whistle when the low voices on the night reached him. Ahead in the moonlight, the barbed-wire of a fence gleamed. The old instinct of the out-trails made Gunn slip from the saddle and advance cautiously. The little valley had fanned out almost level with the mesa surface.

A man swore hoarsely. Said, "We gotta git them cow critters to water. For more 'n one reason, too." He followed it with a chuckle.

Hawk pushed aside some foliage and peered through. On the other side of the fence-line a knot of riders were gathered. One man cupped a match to the quirly in his mouth and Hawk glimpsed a flat face with a bashed-in nose and brows that bumped like craggy knobs above the eyes. He also saw the gray hair at the temples. The match went out.

"You say he's waiting up there at the east water-hole, standing guard, eh?" It was the flat-faced man speaking. "Pete Gunn there too?"

"No. He's home," a rider answered.

"All right," the first one said as his pony sidled nervously. "We're taking the cows through to that water-hole, hell er highwater! You two, you wait here a-whiles to give us a start. Then you slip through the fence here and swing 'round behind him. When you start to break the fence up there, you

can jump 'em from behind. If you put a slug or two into him—well, I won't ask no embarrassing questions." He chuckled again. Then the main bunch moved off.

HAWK GUNN didn't need anybody to draw maps for him on what was going to happen. He waited a few moments, wondering if he could slip through the fence and jump the pair left behind. But they were hunkered down in a small stand of cottonwoods and would have every chance to pick him off if he tried to creep up under that moon. Hand over his pony's nostrils, he turned and worked back cautiously a couple of hundred yards. Then, mounted, he rode up the low valley side and behind a screen of second-growth yellow pine.

He knew where that east water-hole was. It took him about an hour at a hard gallop to reach it. He was about to sing out as he rode toward the low bluff that overhung it on one side. A figure rose from behind a clump of brush, Colts sticking from his hand.

"Keep your hands on that saddle horn, fella!"

"You one of Pete Gunn's hands?" Hawk said.

"Yes. But who are—"

"Look. I was coming along by the fence in the little valley to the south and heard a bunch of riders talking on the other side. Their leader was a gent with a face flat as a dish—"

"That'll be Moss," the man on the ground said. He was tall and stringy, with a serious intense face. He was about Hawk's own age but the other never would fill out. "Yes, yes," he prodded nervously.

"They're coming to drive their stuff through the fence to this water-hole," Hawk told him.

"I figured they would tonight," the other pushed back his weather-warmed sombrero to reveal his straw-like hair. "They been doing it before, cutting the fence and slamming their stuff through. He looked at the bandaged wrist of his left arm. "I nicked a coupla of them, though. Killed off some of their cow critters, too."

"Odds are against you doing that tonight, mister. They are sending two men through the fence down below to come around and nab you from behind just as they hit the fence in front."

The other's face fell. Hawk noticed how he had a big buck teeth, making him looking something the way he had himself as a younker. "I got just one cowhand here with me. All we got, anyway. I reckon I'll just have to stand 'em off long's I can."

Hawk was already dropping from the saddle. The slim fellow stepped forward quickly and rammed his hogleg into the ex-outlaw's belly. "If this is some kind of a trick, I'll—"

"Look, fella. I'm—" He was about to say, "Pete Gunn's own brother" when the rumble of hoofs came from the east. It was the cows across the fence-line, still some distance away, but coming. "Where's your other man?" Hawk demanded with the authority he was used to commanding among men who rode under him. The other pointed over to the north side of the water-hole beneath them with its caked salt-crusted sides.

"All right," Hawk took command. 'Tell him to work up close to the fence and lay low. Them two sneaking in will expect us close to the hole. You and and me, we'll wait in that clump of cottonwood back there and take 'em from behind when they pass us. Tell that other waddy to start banging away at the cows if he hears any gunshots back here. Sabe?"

The slim man was about to question him, then accepted his authority. He ran off, dropping over the side of the low bluff. In a few minutes he returned and followed Gunn, leading his steel-dust, into the stand of scrawny cottonwoods.

"They been doing it afore, the Moss bunch," the slim man explained in his

indecisive voice. "They's been some drought in these parts. But they don't need the water that bad. We—we ain't got such good water on our side of the fence."

Hawk remembered that. That was one of the bad things about Pete's place. There wasn't good water except in a marked wet season.

"Their stuff comes in here and laps up this hole dry. Then our stuff suffers," the other finished bitterly.

"We—"

Hawk dropped a hand on his arm. Something had stirred the high grass out by the low edge of the bluff the quick way the soft night breeze would not. The other levelled his gun. Gunn pressed it down gently. He was playing it as a lobo would. No sense in warning off the band across the fence and letting them pull out safely.

"And they's two of 'em," he reminded the lean gent.

Gunn cupped a hand about his mouth and gave a soft bird call twice. And over at the far end of the bluff, the second man straightened and looked around inquiringly, wondering if were a signal. Their plan was plain, to work around either side of the water hole and put a pincers on its guardians.

"COME ON," Hawk said. They moved out and out toward the nearer man, Hawk himself slipping along like a great cat. He carried a small chunk of wood in his right hand, his hogleg spearing from his left. They closed in on the south side of the waterhole. Ahead a boot grated on the crusted edge. Gunn tossed the wood chunk off to the right. The skulker below straightened and turned that way.

Gunn simply stepped off the little bluff, landed and pounced in two strides. His gun barrel came down on the other's head and laid him out flat. He splashed the water a little as he landed. But Hawk had already turned and was scuttling along in the shadow of the bluff toward the other end of it. The man down there had already come around it and was crouched in reeds close to the hole. He looked their way.

The lean gent behind Hawk Gunn lost his head and rode the trigger. Missed. The gun-snake down there fired. But a jet of flame-lightning ripped from Hawk's gun. And the man went down, clawing at his throat. His head rolled into the water's edge and the latter ran red. His wind-pipe had been smashed by Hawk's deadly shooting.

The cowhand down at the fence was levering away with his Winchester as per orders, pumping slugs at the small herd of cattle that loomed out of the east. At the edges of the herd, Moss hands were driving them along, getting them at the run toward the fence. They figured their two drygulchers would strike any moment from the rear, driving out the two who would be at the fence.

Hawk started at a run for that fence. The moon had heightened and he could see freshly-snipped wire where somebody had come along and cut it under cover of the dried grass. The unsevered top strands would never hold those bolting cow critters. Hawk's two guns began to snap at the leading shapes in the herd. Horns clicked and there were bawling cries from the animals as wounded ones dropped or tried to veer off to escape. But the riders on the flanks only drove them on the harder.

The slim man began to shoot from Gunn's side. But the latter cursed him bluntly and told him to move down toward another break in the fence. Return lead was already zipping in the grass about them. There was no sense in bunching up and giving them a target. A slug just seared Gunn's thigh. But he paid it no heed as he shifted position, reloading swiftly.

A TRIO OF cows just yards from the fence were dropped in their tracks. But the Box-L waddy down there was knocked out of the battle with a slug that creased his head and laid him out stunned. Hawk weaved forward, shooting as he went. From one knee, he took careful aim and struck the Moss rider on the left flank. The man was batted from the saddle and began to drag himself rearward.

Two more animals were drilled and went bawling off crazily to the north. And then the onrushing herd began to turn from this thing that chopped at them. A few did hit the fence, broadside and crash through. But, rising, they swung into the tide of the veering herd and went off.

Two riders did come pounding up to try and head them fenceward again. But when a slug of Hawk's ploughed through the hat crown of the first, both turned and galloped rearward. Back there, the flat-faced Moss could be heard filling the night with curses.

But a few minutes later, the depleted herd, spreading, was swinging northward on Moss range. And the raiding cowhands had pulled out.

Hawk sleeved sweat from his face and trotted back to the water-hole on the side where he had flattened the man with a gun barrel blow. But the hairpin had gone and Gunn caught the crashing of a horse full-tilt through the brush toward the south.

The slim straw-haired man joined him and they revived the cowhand with some water and tied up his head. He was a gnarled middle-aged gent and only cursed because he hadn't been around at the finish for another crack at the Moss bunch. "Old Tonopah ain't as tough as he used to be," he said. "But if they come back—"

Hawk swallowed some water and wished it were red-eye as he brought out his pony. The slim gent had brought his horse from hiding too. He started to thank Hawk Gunn.

But the ex-outlaw cut him short. There was trouble abrewing in this country and he wanted to see his brother pronto. He drew out the note the dead Todd had given him.

"Fella, do you know a Mr. Bird over at Cully's Hill? Or maybe nearby in this piece of country? I was told to give this note to the bartender at the *Lone Star Saloon* and say it's for Mr. Bird."

The nervous slim gent reached for the note. "That's for me, then."

"Easy. You know who it's from."

"Man called Todd.... We was communicating that way... You see, my name ain't really 'Bird'. I just used that. I'm Hannibal Gunn...."

- 5 -

HAWK GUNN almost swallowed the black cigaro he had just put in his mouth. "You—you—uh—" He wondered if he had gone locoed. Hannibal Gunn—that was his own name.

"Sure. Brother of Pete Gunn of the Box-L here." He had already plucked the ragged folded paper from Hawk's stunned fingers. He paled as he read it. "Well, we're finished. Moss has us whipped for fair now."

Tonopah frowned. "Hell, Hanny, we just whupped him good tonight."

"This is from Todd, the gunslinger us small ranchers hired. He won't be here tomorrow to help us protect our interests in the election. He—" The man who called himself Hannibal Gunn looked at Hawk. "Got killed in a shooting ruckus," Hawk said automatically, studying the other hard.

"Know who did it?"

"There was four. I threw in with Todd. I got a gent called Jeb and one with a black mustache. But they got him."

"The one with the mustache was

Keno Salt. Him and Jeb was both Moss men. They must have learned somehow that Todd was coming in to help us.... I—I got to tell Pete about it right off."

"I'll drift along with you," Hawk said.

They left Tonopah to guard the water-hole just in case Moss did make another try and moved northward. The slim one led the way onto the cart-track after they crossed a low rise. Hawk pulled in his pony to drop back, then slicked out a gun. The other saw him too late from the tail of his eye.

"Sit quiet—and live a while, anyway," Hawk told him. "You ain't Hannibal Gunn, you fourflusher!"

The other's mouth tightened. "Sure I am. I—"

"Save the lying, fella. You ain't."

Indecision crept into the other's eyes. "How—how do you know?"

"Because I know Hannibal Gunn, pretty good myself. I—I rode with him." He didn't know why he said that last.

SOMETHING like intermixed relief and sadness came over the other's face. He nodded. "Yes, I was pretty sure I wasn't, myself. But I never quite knew for sure. They said I was—swore it up and down."

"Who?"

"Pete Gunn and his wife, Sarah.... You see, Pete found me one night on the trail, wounded and unconscious. Been bushwhacked, I guess. All my dinero gone, anyway. When I first remembered anything, I was in bed at their place."

"What?" Hawk asked incredulously.

"That's God's truth. You see, I don't know who I am myself. I can't recall anything in my life before waking up at the Box-L ranch."

"What happened?"

The slim one Tonopah called Hanny went on, voice low and weary. Pete Gunn had insisted he was his kid brother. Looked just like him when he

vanished four years before. They had insisted on him staying on, assuring him he would remember.

"Then Pete got his leg pinched under a horse. It was just after he bought that piece of pasture land with all his savings. So I stayed on to help him run the place. Maybe I was his kid brother. I never knew—till now. I meant no harm. I've worked and fought beside Pete. He ....'s all."

With a motion of his gun, Hawk directed him to keep riding. They moved on a space. "Tell me about this trouble with this Moss. I thought that was the old Fowler range."

Hanny told him. The Fowlers had sold out to this Moss who bought because he had advance knowledge of the damn up north the state was going to build to water this valley. Moss' next move had been to try and force out as many of his half-starving two-bit neighboring outfits as possible to pick them up cheap.

"There's been plenty of trouble—like you seen tonight," Hanny went on. "Tomorrow's the election in town for a gun marshal to keep law in the country."

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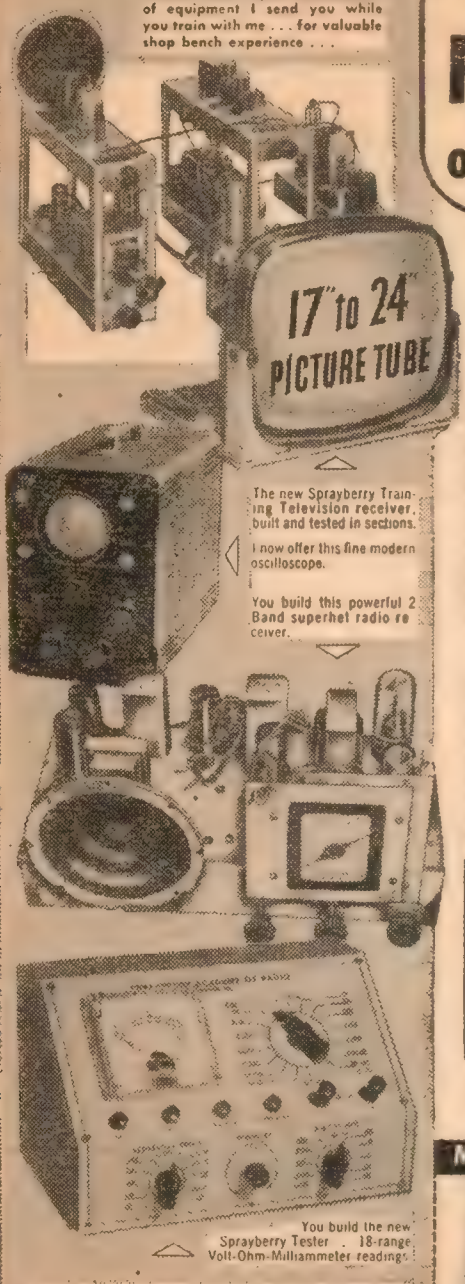

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But Moss, with a spread of tough-bitten gunhands, had put up his own candidate, a whisky-swilling tinhorn he had in his pocket. The independent ranchers had their candidate, a young fellow who had been a deputy over in Cochise, Nobbins, a square shooter.

"There isn't a chance of our putting him in, though. The townsfolks are scared and will vote with what looks like the winner to protect themselves afterward. And Moss had dropped the word none of our bunch will be allowed to vote. He's got his gunhands to back it. That's why we hired that Todd to come in. I'll have to tell my broth—I mean, Pete."

THEY ROUNDED a bend in the trail and a faint light in one of the windows of the Box-L ranch house showed. Hawk saw that it had been painted and a couple of new rooms put on the side since he'd gone away. He reined in again, thinking.

"Look," he said suddenly, "I can be Todd for you."

"What do you mean? And say, you knew Hannibal himself. What's your handle?"

Gunn looked down at his saddle horn. "Call me Curly." After all, Curly had been a saddle pard of his. "Curly, yeah. I can play Todd. The Moss outfit'll think they just made a mistake and got the wrong hombre. I'm willing."

"Todd was one devil of a gunslinger," Hanny said hesitantly.

"I ain't so sluggish clearing a guniron from holster leather myself," Gunn said. "Hannibal always thought I was plumb fast. For—for his sake, I'll throw in with you and help."

Hanny leaned from the saddle to clutch his arm in gratitude. Then caught himself. "But what about me? I'm not Hannibal Gunn and—"

"That can wait till later. Go up and tell Pete about this. Say nothing about yourself to anybody."

"Well, you come along too and—"

"I'll—I'll wait down the trail a piece. I might make a slip and spill things." He watched the other ride into the ranchyard. In the back of Hawk's mind was a vague idea about straightening out this identification matter after the shooting was settled. It would be one hell of a surprise to Pete then and...

He dropped to the ground and slipped up toward the side of the house. The shade on the window was drawn but it didn't quite reach the sill. Removing his black sombrero, he peeked in. The first thing he saw was the new neat furniture in the ranch-house front room. Then he saw Sarah come in from the kitchen with a pot of steaming java. She wore glasses now. Before he hadn't noticed what fine straight-forward eyes she had.

Pete, his brother, appeared on the stairs. He walked with a cane. But still there was something upright and defiant and unbreakable about him. The toil and strain of the years had seamed his face. But you sensed you might crush him under but you'd never make him call quits. He gripped Hanny's arm fondly as the other told what had occurred.

Hawk saw his brother's head turn toward the road. The ex-outlaw realized Hanny must be telling him about him, then. He turned and walked quickly down from the window. For the first

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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time he realized what he had thrown away when he hit the owlhoot trail.

After a while, Hanny came out and mounted and rode down to the bend. "You don't know what you've just done Curly. Pete's worked like a horse all his life to build this outfit. When the dam begins to operate next spring, this'll be real fine range. And if we're licked tomorrow—well, Pete might as well ride right out now."

They headed for town, Cully's Hill. "He won't lose," Hawk said grimly.

AN HOUR after dawn the next day, the independent ranchers gathered in the old blacksmith's barn at the top edge of Cully's Hill. Hawk Gunn himself stood out in front of the barn a few minutes, looking over the town as it emerged from the grayness and swirling ground mist. It wasn't really a hill, just a low rise out of the mesa. The town hadn't changed much save for a couple of new stores and the new steeple on the Baptist church. It made something in him turn over with a queer sickening flip-flop. It was good to be back.

Then he tightened his mouth and turned and walked inside. They were a silent gloomy-faced bunch. "This is King Todd, the man we hired," Hanny introduced him.

A few nodded. One said, "Well, it's too late now. Moss ran a coupla first-class gunslingers himself last night. The word is he's paying 'em two-fifty a-piece if they's no trouble—and double if they is."

"They must be plumb walking hell with smoke-poles at that figure," another said.

Hawk sat on an anvil and let them have their say. The election booth was down at the post-office in the middle of the town's main street. The local folk were sticking to their home till they saw the outcome of the showdown between Moss and the little men. The booth opened for balloting at seven

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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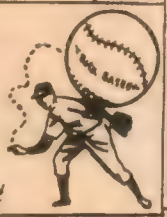

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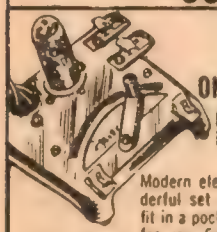

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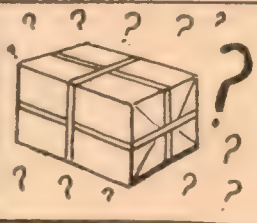

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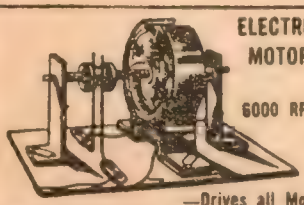

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sharp. One reported that Moss had his whole outfit waiting down in the trees at the foot of the slope.

"They'll come swinging up the road and then we gotta walk smack down it if we gotta vote. Then—shucks, what's the use."

"We could bunch up in front of the post-office," a one-armed rancher said.

"And get burned down like a lot of milling cattle?" another snapped back wearily. "We gotta march down and take—"

HAWK STOOD up, throwing away his cigaro. He asked Hanny how many men Moss had at his back. They numbered up about a dozen better than the independents and their hands. But Moss' cowhands were hired because they were hardened gunslingers first.

"And if the towns-people see you voting and got a chance—they'll swing in behind you and vote for your man?"

"That's the way the land lies," a bearded man put in. "We gotta march down and try to cut through and—"

"Hell no!" Hawk snapped. "That's just what he wants you to do. Don't be danged fool sheep! Don't play his game."

"What do we do, Mr. Smart Aleck?"

"Any of you got friends living here?" A few nodded.

"All right. You'll get in their houses, at front windows. The rest of us will

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slip in alleys. That doorway of the General Store is deep and dim because of the wooden awning out front. Then we'll wait for him to come up the hill and the road to the post-office and open fire. It won't be out-and-out stand-up scrapping. That's what he wants. It'll be skirmishing, sniping off men, Sabe?"

A few of them began to grin and nod.

"Suppose they go back and then swing up to take us in the rear on either side, catching men up front in alleys and houses?" the one-armed man said, squirting a rusty horseshoe with tobacco juice.

"I'll post men out back to cover just that. He'll fire a shot and you fellas on that side can turn around and strike from the back end. All right?"

"What're you going to do yourself—at your fancy price?" one asked.

"I'll be up the road a little, ready to close down and stop any Moss man reaching the post-office," Hawk said casually. But that was going to be a grim job. They started to file out, checking guns at the last minute, saying little. It was all or nothing for these little fellows....

The stage was set. Hawk knew it as he hunkered behind the ragged stump of that lightning-riven tree not fifty feet up from the post-office. His men were planted in a few houses and in alleys and behind porch stairs, silent and hidden. But if anything went amiss and the Moss bunch crashed through, he himself would be trapped.

DOWN THE broken wooden sidewalk the three townsmen on the election committee walked quickly and nervously, turned out in their Sunday best, holsters at their hips. One of them carried a sign: "Balloting here." They kept their eyes pinned at the bottom of the slope. Then they were half running toward the post-office

building. For the first Moss riders had swung into side past the cutback.

Even as the key grated in the post-office lock with voting due to open legal in fifteen minutes, the Moss outfit was pushing up into Cully's Hill at a handlope. Then Hawk's quiet yet powerful voice broke out.

"Stand back from the voting place, riders! No man wearing a gun can go within ten yards of it! Stand back—or shed your hardware!"

The first two riders reined in. Then dish-faced Moss himself pushed forward, peered up the deserted street. He said something and they laughed. "I'd feel plumb naked without my hogleg," one rider guffawed. And they came on, slower and more guardedly. Those in front had their guns bared, glittering in the new-risen sun.

"Ten yards!" Hawk repeated. But they came on, and on. "I warned you," he called. And his gun spat. It was the signal. The lead rider leaned free of a wounded horse crashing under him.

The whole Moss outfit, breaking and swinging and seeking a target, cut loose. Four slugs jetted dust fairly near Hawk. Moss bawled something and they spurred their ponies in a charge. And the spasmodic but sharpshooting fire racketed from the windows and alley fronts. Two more men went down, one lying motionless, the other fleeing as he limped.

But the Moss men barged right on in, crashing lead at the windows and at the fleeting glimpses they had of snipers from doorways and behind steps. One of the Independents reeled out of an alley. But big Hawk leaped from his open post and ran down, cutting an avenue before him with his spiking lead. He seized the man and got him back to cover, taking over his post.

The Moss men turned at a shouted order and swept back down the hill. But it wasn't for far. They knotted in a parley. And then they came up again

[*Turn Page*]

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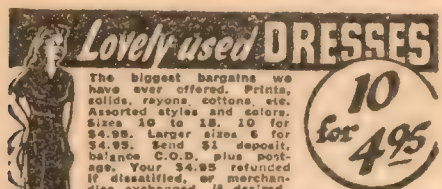

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more slowly, certain trained trigger men such as they could chop down the little more than a handful of desperate ranchmen.

ONE OF the latter slanted a shot from a second story window. And four Moss men slashed lead back at it in reply. The rancher up there dropped his gun down the front of the house and tumbled backward, cursing a busted arm. But two of that Moss quartet were knocked from their saddles by the retaliatory fire, one of them rolling limply in the dust, a hole in his forehead. Still the Moss men forced their way up, trying to gang up on each sniper. Another of the ranchmen was hit.

And then two Moss horsemen broke from the rest, spurring their ponies wildly. Weaving and curveting as they came, they got opposite the post-office and landed running.

"Git in there and hold it!" Moss bellowed through the din.

Hawk was glad he had held his fire then, waiting to see what their play would be. He slid from the alley and cut down toward them. At twenty paces, he knocked the leg out from under one and sent him tumbling in the alkali. The other, almost in the doorway, turned and slammed lead at Hawk. But he went to his knees as he got a flesh wound in that thigh grazed last night, then shot the man dead through the chest. He folded up under the sign "Balloting Here."

That ended that sortie. The Moss riders retreated down to the cutbank. They confabbed again. Sweat pouring from beneath his sombrero with the strain as the fiery sun mounted, Hawk wondered why they were so careful to keep in sight. It would be a better game to disappear and let them do some guessing and—

There was a shot from the rear of the alley where he stood. Fearful, he

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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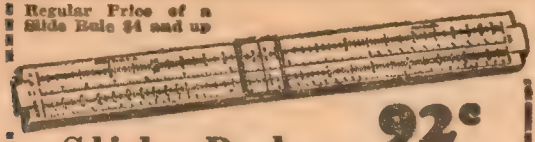

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whirled and limped back through it. But there was nothing to worry about. A gleeful member of the independent ranchers stood there calmly blowing on a smoking gun. He was the one-armed one. He gestured with the gun where the movements of the underbrush showed the passage of a man working his way down the side of the hill.

"Saw him all the time and let him git right close—then I winged him neat as you'd stitch a seam," the one-armed one boasted.

Out front, some ten minutes passed. Then a Moss gunhand came walking up the hill with a piece of yellow cloth tied to a stick. "Wanta parley," he yelled.

Hawk waved for him to come on and went down to meet him. One of his men yelled to him to watch for tricks. The Moss man gave him the boss' message in a loud voice. "Moss says you won't let us vote and you don't dare come out and vote yourselves or you're whipped. It's a deadlock."

"We like it," Hawk answered.

"The boss says to let's save a heap of killing. We'll send two men up the road and you send two down to duel it out. All right?"

Hawk Gunn took that stub of cold cigaro from his lips, looked at it, then tossed it away. "All right," he said as if in answer as to whether he would sit in at a game of penny ante.

It was quiet as he returned back up the hill. "Who's going to meet them two gunslicks Moss imported last night?" one of the men called from a doorway.

"Everybody hold your positions," Hawk said first. "I'll be one to meet them."

It was quiet again. None of the rest wanted that almost sure-death assignment. Then Hanny emerged from behind a pair of steps.

"You can't do it alone, Curly," he said.

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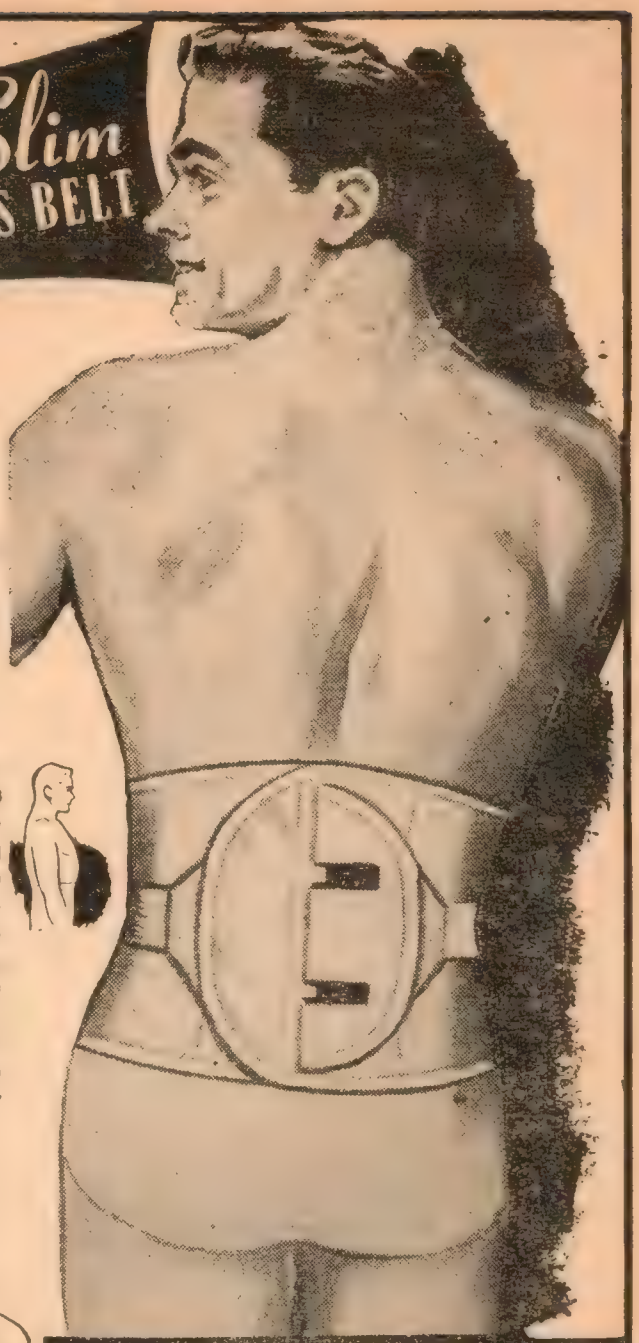

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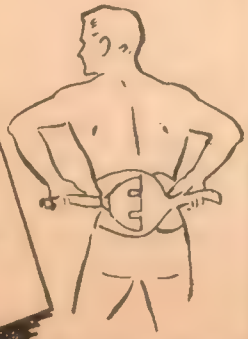

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"If I have to," Hawk Gunn said with a shrug. "Going to be one hot day, ain't it? Pete get here yet?"

Hanny shook his head, toeing the dirt. Then he walked over and stood beside Hawk facing down the hill. "I git sorta nervous in a tight and don't shoot so danged straight," he said, a quaver in his voice. "But no pard of Hannibal Gunn's goes alone against two while I'm around."

Hawk chuckled deep. "Slam shots at their legs the first break," he advised. . . .

IT HAPPENED and was over quickly. Everybody watching figured the man called Curly was doomed.

The two men came up the hill, the special gunslingers, both swarthy and beard-stubbled, of a height. One had long, apelike arms. The other had a red shirt. They trudged up very business-like; this was a cut-and-dried job to them. Their hands were thumb-hooked in their sagging shell belts.

And then Hanny, swinging along beside big Hawk, cursed with the tension. And all eight hands were digging toward holsters. It was Hawk who flashed up his guns first. But his boot hit a hidden stone in the dust and he almost went over. Red Shirt fired and Hanny spun out of the fight with a slug in his right shoulder. The pair darted sideward, spreading, as their muzzles swept toward the lone Gunn.

He leaped forward right at them, zigzagging. He rode those triggers. People saw the slice of blood stain his cheek where lead nicked him. And then the gunner with the apelike arms was flat on his back in the gutter with a red stain on his chest which wouldn't grow much bigger because his blood had stopped circulating.

Hawk flung himself flat on his right side. The red-shirted one had ducked behind a post. He furrowed earth not

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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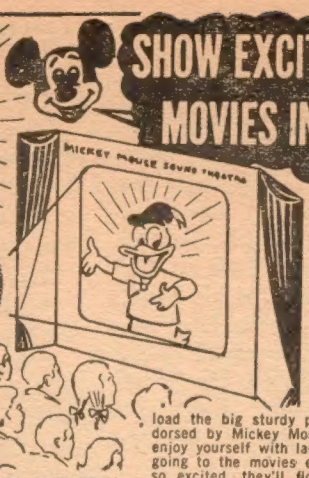

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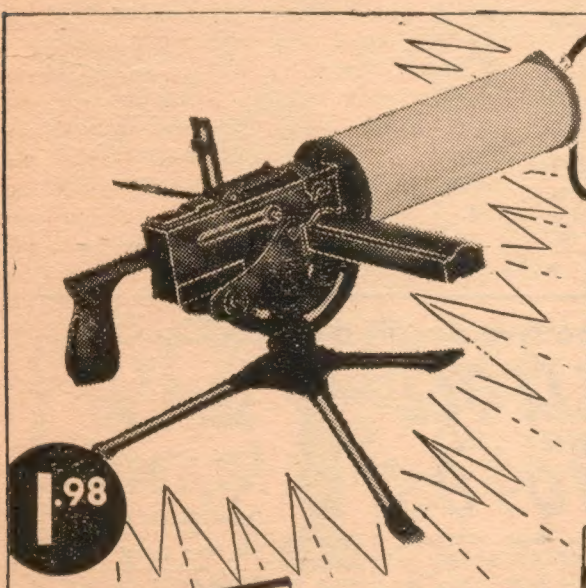

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inches from Hawk's head. And then the latter's right gun crackled and Red Shirt staggered screeching from back of the post, a foot, the one thing he hadn't gotten covered, smashed. Hawk's next shot came a split second later and took Red Shirt flush in the teeth, passing out the back of his head.

There was a long moment. Moss himself had ridden halfway up the hill. He stared. Then he whirled his horse and went dashing pell-mell down the hill. After a few seconds he and his remaining bunch pulled out, his power broke in the Strip. Hawk grinned a little as he stood blowing the gunsmoke curling from his Colts muzzles....

THE VOTING had started as a jubilant town milled on the streets once more. Hawk known as Curly, was the center of an admiring throng at the bar of the *Lone Star*. Over the heads of men he saw his lame brother, Pete, ride up the hill in a buggy, Sarah smiling proudly at his side. Hawk started to push his way clear.

Things could be settled down and—Across the road, he saw a slim, brown-haired girl rush up to Hanny and hug him carefully around his arm in a sling. That would be Mary Ann, Hawk knew. He turned back to the bar and picked up another drink. It was going to take some thinking out.

Five minutes later, he saw a couple of strangers ride up. looking around. One was Little Packy and the other was Holy Joe Wince. They passed on, heading for the other bar, Hawk knew.

And then he knew the answer to everything. It came all in a rush and it was hard to take.

But when he slipped out the back door unnoticed in the excitement, his decision was made. He had left a note for "Mr. Bird," Hanny, with the bartender. It simply said, "The real Hannibal died some time back. You keep right on being him for Pete's sake. Adios....Curly."

He hustled down behind the street until he picked up Holy Joe and Packy about to dismount at the other barroom. Hawk stole up the alley and whistled softly. They looked around.

He called: "Pick me up a horse, boys. I had a little private business to 'tend to the other night. We're riding again." He knew it was better that way. He could never cut clear of his old bonds. There was always danger of himself being exposed and bringing shame on his family if he did identify himself...."I wanta look up Dutch Schlintz," he added as he saw them grin.

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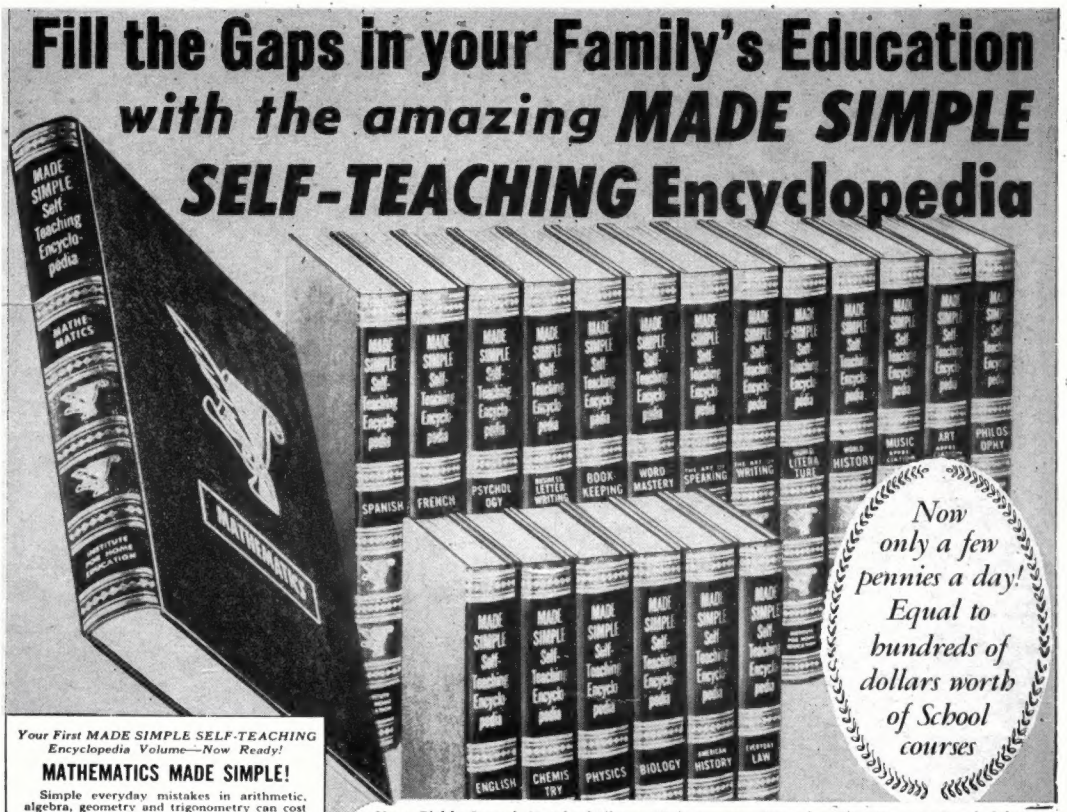

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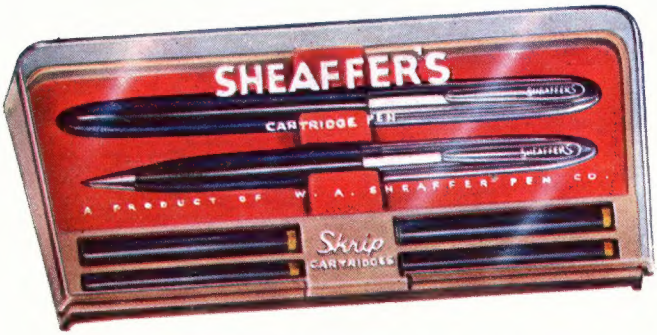

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